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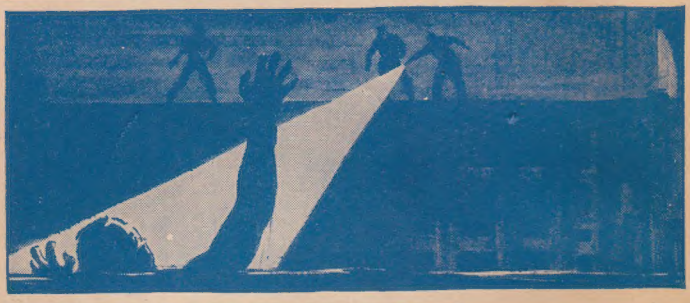
"IT WAS STILL DARK...and bitter cold on the waterfront...when I finished my night patrol," writes Mr. Hahnel. "I had paused for a moment to say hello to a couple of friends when above the dismal sounds of the river came a piercing shriek and a heavy splash. Then there was silence.

"WE RUSHED FOR THE WHARF. I yanked out my flashlight and turned it on the water. There in the icy river 14 feet below we saw a man struggling feebly...clawing at the ice-sheathed pilings as the out-racing tide sucked him away from the pier.



"QUICKLY I DARTED my light about and located a length of line on a nearby barge...and a life preserver on an adjoining pier. In an instant the preserver splashed in the water beside the drowning man. Dazed from shock and cold, half clinging to the preserver and half lassoed by the line, he was dragged to safety. Thanks to my 'Eveready' flashlight and its dependable *fresh* DATED batteries the river was cheated of its victim. *(Signed)* Frank J. Hahnel"

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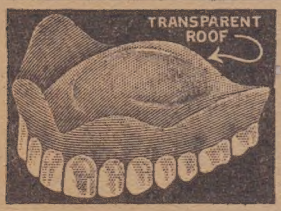

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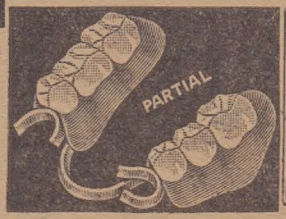

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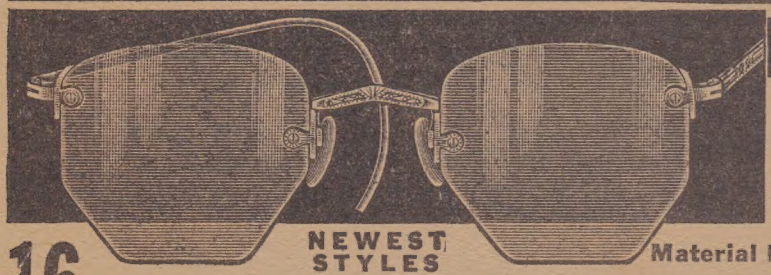

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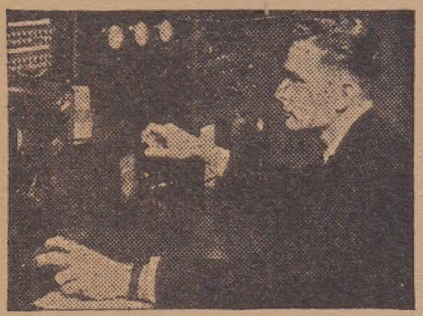

RADIO TECHNICIANS, OPERATORS hold good jobs in the 882 Broadcasting Stations in the U. S. with average pay among the country's best paid industries. Aviation, Police, Commercial, Marine, Government Radio, forging ahead even during the War, employ Radio Technicians and Operators. Soldiers, Sailors, Marines with Radio training win extra rank, pay, are ready for good jobs after their military service is over. I train you to be ready when Television opens jobs in the future. Mail the Coupon for complete details.

REPAIRING, SERVICING, home and auto Radio sets (there are now 50,197,000 in use) gives good jobs to thousands, offers more opportunities now than ever. Loudspeaker Systems are another source of profit for Radio Technicians. Many Radio Technicians operate their own spare time or full time Radio business, servicing, repairing, selling Radio sets. Get the facts. Mail the coupon.

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$200 a Month in Own Business

For several years I have been in business for myself making around $200 a month. Business has steadily increased. I have N. R. I. to thank for my start in this field. —*ARLIE J. FROEHNER, 300 W. Texas Ave., Goose Creek, Texas.*

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I am engaged in spare time Radio work. I average from $5 to $10 a week. I often wished that I had enrolled sooner because all this extra money sure does come in handy.—*THEODORE K. DuBREE, Horsham, Penna.*

Operating Naval Radio Station

I am now operating the Radio Range Station, one of the new simultaneous types, here at the Naval Air Station. Glad to give N. R. I. its share of credit in the success I have had thus far.—*GRIFFITH SECHLER, Radioman First Class, U. S. Navy.* (Address omitted for military reasons.)

Learn At Home To Make $30 $40 $50 a Week

MAIL THE COUPON! Find out about the many opportunities Radio offers you to make more money quickly and to prepare yourself for a good-pay job after the War. Whether you're eligible for military service or exempt, you should get my 64-page Book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's FREE. It tells about Radio's present and future opportunities and how I train beginners at home in spare time to be Radio Technicians and Operators; how I teach operating principles of Army, Navy, Civilian Defense Radio equipment.

5 Reasons Why You Should Learn Radio Now

(1) *The Radio Repair Business Is Booming.* Because of the shortage of new sets, and increased interest in Radio programs, fixing Radios offers many extra new opportunities for Radio Technicians. (2) *U. S. Government is calling* for thousands of CIVILIAN Radio Technicians, Operators and is paying well for their services. (3) *Government Orders for Radio Equipment*, amounting to millions of dollars, are creating opportunities for men with Radio training to earn good pay, overtime. (4) *Radio Is Ready to Expand After the War.* Television, Frequency Modulation, Electronic Instruments and Controls will offer new opportunities in the future. (5) *Extra Pay in Army, Navy, Too!* Radio Training offers men likely to enter military service, soldiers, sailors, marines, many opportunities to win extra rank, extra prestige, more interesting duty and earn up to 6 times a private's base pay.

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Radio is one of the country's fastest-growing peacetime industries. It is a vital industry during wartime, too. That's why N. R. I.-trained Radio Technicians and Operators earn good pay in practically every branch of Radio today; in Broadcasting, Aviation, Commercial, Police, Marine, Government Radio Stations; in Radio Factories; fixing Radio sets in spare time or full time; in Radio businesses of their own. Many fields of Radio are expanding fast during the war. Many more new branches of Radio (Television, Frequency Modulation, etc.), held back now, will create new peacetime opportunities after the war. N. R. I. gives you the required knowledge of Radio to take advantage of these present and future opportunities.

Beginners Soon Learn to Make $5, $10 a Week Extra in Spare Time

Part time Radio Technicians have more opportunities now than ever before. In fact, many men I train prefer to hold their regular jobs, and make extra money fixing Radio sets in their spare time. I give you special training and show you how to start fixing Radios early. You also get my *6 Big Kits of Radio Parts* and instructions for building test equipment, for conducting experiments which give you valuable, practical experience. My fifty-fifty method — half working with real Radio parts, half studying my lesson texts — makes learning Radio at home interesting, fascinating, practical.

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J. E. SMITH, President
Dept. 2D09, National Radio Institute
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Plays on Radio

I am happy to tell you that for four weeks I have been on the air over our local radio station. So thanks to your institution for such a wonderful course.

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WHAT instrument would you like to play? We'll show you how you can learn to play it—quickly, easily, in spare time at home—for less than SEVEN CENTS A DAY! Never mind if you don't know one note of music from another—don't worry about "special talent."

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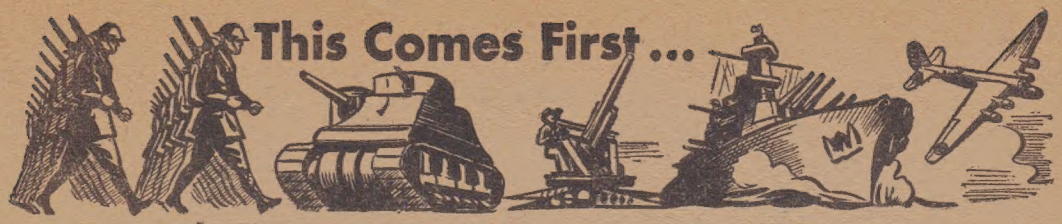

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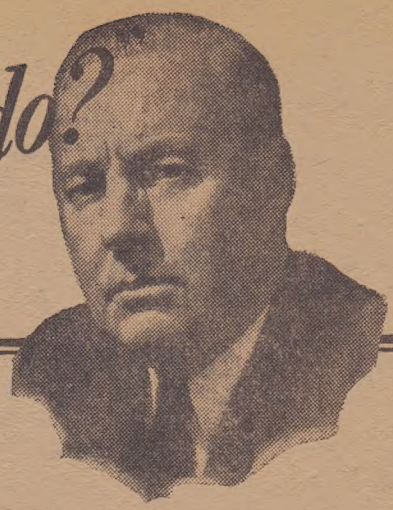
"What can I do?



"LIKE millions of other Americans; I've asked myself one question repeatedly ever since these fateful words popped out of my radio:

"'Japanese planes have bombed Hawaii!'

"Daily, nightly, I've turned this question over and over in my mind—with the reading of every news bulletin on the air and the appearance of every epic headline.

"What can I do—here at home?

"What can I do—while Americans are fighting and dying in the far reaches of the Pacific for freedom and for me?"

"What can I do?

"I've looked in my shaving mirror for an answer—and found none.

"I've seen only the perplexed face of a middle-aged man—a man too old to bear arms.

"I've glanced at my hands, too, a thousand times, only to learn a brutal truth.

"They are soft and white—strangers to the production line where only skilled hands are wanted now."

"What can I do?

"Only last night I found the answer as my eyes fell on my wife's knitting bag and my ears caught the click of her knitting needles.

"I could give to the Red Cross. I could answer its urgent call for funds, now so sorely needed.

"I could give to the limit of my means to aid and comfort those who are giving so much more.

"Yes—I could do something. Not much—but something.

"And I have—today."

Give and give generously—to your local chapter—to volunteer solicitors. Give when you can, where you can, as much as you can.

SEND CONTRIBUTIONS TO YOUR LOCAL CHAPTER

AMERICAN RED CROSS
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America Can't Wait
Industry needs you NOW

Defense Program Needs Trained Men

There is a tremendous shortage of skilled men in almost all branches of industry. Draftsmen, electricians, machine designers, machinists, are wanted for good jobs at fine pay. Executives too; foremen, superintendents, managers, are needed right now to handle the enormous demand for finished products of all kinds. If you are already in one of these fields, you owe it to your country, to your family, and to yourself to make yourself even more valuable, to climb and climb fast and help put through the most important program we have ever had to face.

Opportunities Everywhere

Home building, ship building, manufacturing plants, great utility projects, road building—everywhere you look you find a demand for men—not just ordinary workers, but men who know more than their fellows, who are better at their jobs, who know both theory and practice and can therefore train other men, thus rising to more and more important stations and being of greater and greater help. Practically every industry is included in those needing MEN, trained men, skilled men, men with ambition and punch.

Rich Rewards

In bidding for skilled men now, industry of all kinds, everywhere in the United States is offering top pay. They want the best men and they are willing to pay for their services. But remember this, you not only have opportunities for bigger pay than you probably ever hoped for, but the chances for advancement are even greater. Foremen, superintendents, factory managers, must be drawn from the ranks, and surely you know that the man who studies, who tries to know everything there is to know about his job will be picked first. Best of all, under the present training program, with the tremendous need for skilled men you don't have to look too far in the future for:

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Over 40 years ago we developed a system of home study which has helped thousands of men to important positions in the mechanical and business world. Those of you who have missed college training, who haven't the time to go away to school, who must LEARN AS THEY EARN, can get education in your particular field—yes, education of college grade right in your own home. Best of all, you can study when you have the time, and above everything else you will have the commendation and the respect of your employers in doing so. Rest assured that every superintendent, every factory manager, every general manager will have his eye on the man who pushes forward, who recognizes the great need of the day, and who has made up his mind to be one of the first to make good.

Get the Facts

(No Cost) All you have to do to find out about this type of training, to get the details and the outline of study, with histories of the successes of other men, is to write us or send the coupon. There is no cost and no obligation of any kind. Let this great school, one of the pioneers in the home study field, explain the methods which can do so much for you. Get this information now so that you can make up your mind quickly to get started on the road to the fulfilment of a real ambition, and so that you may be of the greatest possible help in this present emergency.

Business Welcomes Applications from American School Advanced Students and Graduates

Whenever trained men have been badly needed, business has been quick to say, "We welcome applications from American School advanced students and graduates." We maintain an employment placement service to help put you in touch with the best openings, and we make no extra charge of any kind for this service. Write now for an outline of home study training courses; check the coupon indicating your preference and mail it promptly.

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- ☐Engine and Boiler Work

Name.....*Occupation*.....

Address.....*Age*.....

City.....*State*.....

HIYA, gals and galluses! Seems a long spell since us Ranger Club folks got together in our last GET FRONTIER POSTED guessin' game. Remember? Familiar western palaver made up one contest. Useful border lingo was another. Spanish names for common birds and animals was what we amused and edified ourselves with in a third guess roundup.

Well, here's a brand-new set of 12 words for this brand-new GET FRONTIER POSTED game. These words are out o' the everyday vocabulary of every cowboy and ranger. You've come on 'em many a time in stories in this TEXAS RANGERS Magazine. So they'll be easy to guess. Reckon you know most of 'em already.

Heaps o' you Ranger Club folks hope someday to roam the Rio your ownselves, and realize this border savvy will come in plenty useful when you do. There's the old Spanish proverb that states this point o' view real neat.

The proverb says:

"He who would bring home the wealth of the Indies must carry the wealth of the Indies with him."

Meaning, you must take knowledge with you to bring home knowledge.

So here we go, gals and galluses, to get a little knowledge into our systems by this here painless GET FRONTIER POSTED method.

Like I just said, there's 12 words in the list. If you guess ten correct, you're an expert on trail travel. Eight is a good score. Half or less correct guesses and you're a yahoo, in the pilgrim class.

Now grab your pencil and tally off your dozen guesses, a, b, or c. Don't look in the back pages for the right answers till you finish.

Ready? Let's go!

1—LATIGO is a
- a horsewhip
- b rope
- c saddle part

2—MACARTY is a
- a hitchrack
- b tierope
- c bedroll

3—DIAMOND HITCH is a
- a rope rig
- b harness
- c brand

4—SHEEPSHANK is
- a grub
- b garb
- c a pair of knots

5—HACKAMORE is a
- a cutting tool
- b conveyance
- c bridle

6—KAK is a
- a boat
- b pack sack
- c drink

7—DOUBLE RIG is
- a pardnership
- b two-gun belt
- c type of saddle

8—INDIAN HOBBLE is a
- a bullet wound
- b dance
- c rope stunt

9—TRAVOIS is a
- a wild plant
- b haul drag
- c woven basket

10—TARP is a
- a canvas cover
- b fish
- c disease

11—HONDO is a
- a loop
- b medicine
- c pond

12—WAR BAG is a
- a holster
- b cloud
- c wardrobe

Now hold on, don't peek at the answers yet! We got lots to talk over, folks. These days, filled with so much about war, it's plum interesting to recall that one of the world's 16 great decisive battles was fought in—Texas!

On April 21, 1836, Gen. Sam Houston with 780 men clashed with Mexican Gen. Santa Anna with 1300 men on a prairie knoll about 20 miles southeast of the present thrivin' metropolis of Houston.

They fought for a half hour. Houston lost two men. Santa Anna's losses ran to 630!

Why is it listed as one of the world's great decisive battles? Because it won Texas her freedom. It gave United States the vast territory between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean.

There's a monument 12 feet higher than the Washington Monument that now marks the San Jacinto battlefield. On top is a great star, 27 feet across, weighing 220 tons.

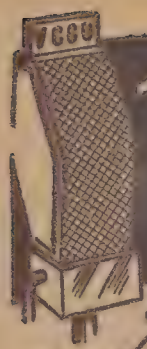
Today's Ranger Chief

And here's the answer to a question somebody asked a while back. The question was, who is head of the Texas Rangers today?

Answer is, Col. Homer Garrison, director of the state public safety department, Austin, Texas. He's the big boss of the Rangers. Might be interesting to a heap o' folks to know that cattle rustling is on the increase, along with the big jump in meat prices. Texas Rangers are kept on the hop in the thin-populated range country, where they still fork horses and pack six-guns.

The modern cattle rustlers use trucks. They work so fast that catching 'em in the

(Continued on page 12)



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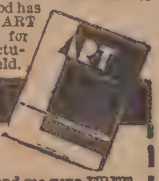

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THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 10)

act is mighty near hopeless. To make it even harder for the law, they sometimes butcher beef critters on the spot, then rush the carcasses to a shady meat dealer. They've learned to dodge the checking stations along the highways, where inspectors lurk.

Fifth Column Rustlers

There's a new brand o' crook been brung to light in this new-fangled rustling. He's what you might call the fifth column of the rustling racket. He's the driver of a legitimate truckline who stops at lonely places, lets the rustlers load stolen beef into his big refrigerated express truck, then transports the beef for 'em—for a cut in the profits.

Rustled beef has also been whisked past inspection stations and over state lines disguised as something else. There was one grab of carcasses hidden inside a bulky load of baled hay. How many got past undetected nobody in authority was able to say.

One o' the fifth columnists of a rustler outfit drove a light side panel laundry pick-up. He had a plausible excuse for backing in at a meat dealer's platform—to collect butcher aprons or deliver 'em. In back o' the laundry bags he carried a fresh-killed range steer about every other trip.

They nailed him when a stray dog that had adopted a Ranger on checking station duty did a large amount of sniffing at the laundryman.

And so she goes. Now for our 12 correct answers.

1—c is correct. LATIGO is the cinch strap on a saddle. This word is Mex but it's in use all over out West. It's right common, in fact, bein' a place name as well as a thing name. That is, you come on Latigo Mountain, Latigo Canyon, Latigo Creek in plenty o' regions.

2—b is correct. A MACARTY is the tierope on a saddle horse, usually of hemp, and about eight feet long. It's usually carried short-looped to the left fork of a saddle, with the yonder end tied around the animal's neck or spliced into a halter ring.

3—a is correct. The DIAMOND HITCH is a way of knotting a pack onto a saddle so's the pack won't slip. It's sort of complicated and though I've seen it in printed drawings, I never did meet up with anybody who learned to tie a diamond hitch thataway. It's necessary knowledge, though, to pack-in prospectors, rangers and cowpunchers. The name comes from the way the rope makes a diamond shape on top o' the pack.

4—c is correct. A SHEEPSHANK is a knot, or rather a pair o' knots, useful mainly in taking up slack in a rope, where both ends are tied permanent. It has another use which is uncommon but sometimes mighty useful. It's been known to save a man's life, in a true situation which I'll describe right here while we're at it: A puncher in the Pecos country of west Texas, followin' a rustler trail, got himself lost in dry rimrock country. He was close onto dying from thirst when he come onto the Pecos gorge. Plenty o' water down there in the river but no trail down.

He figured awhile, then shook out his lariat. He tied one end to a snag and lowered himself hand over hand to a ledge. It was still another rope's length down to water. He had just the one rope.

How did he get on down?

Here's how. Before lowering himself he

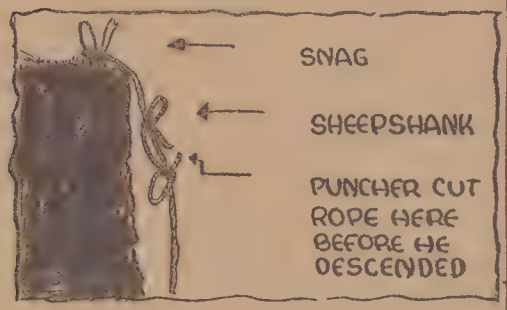
(Continued on page 13)

THE FRONTIER POST

(Continued from page 12)

had tied a sheepshank in the upper end of his rope and cut one of the three strands in the center of the sheepshank. That made it possible, when he reached the ledge and slacked the rope, to shake the rope free, sacrificing only two-three feet o' rope that stayed up on the snag. Then he tied the rope again, there on the ledge, lowered himself the rest o' the way down and saved himself from a slow and miserable end.

Here's what the trick looked like:



5—c is correct. A HACKAMORE is a bitless bridle, sometimes called an Indian bridle. It can be made in a minute from a short piece o' rope, so long as there's enough left for one short rein. It's specially useful to put on a horse you're leading, like in a pack string.

6—b is correct. A KAK is a pack sack or panier, but not a pack saddle as some folks think. Kaks are hung, one on each side of a pack saddle to balance the load. Punchers sometimes humorously refer to a cheap, bad-made ridin' saddle as a "kak."

7—s is correct. DOUBLE RIGGING is a two-cinch saddle. It's sometimes called "Texas rigging." Double cinch is generally favored in steep, rough riding.

8—c is correct. An INDIAN HOBBLE consists of a rope run from halter or bit ring and snugged to a hind shank of a horse. An animal so hobbled can graze and get around slow and awkward-like but can't raise his head to run off.

9—b is correct. A TRAVOIS consists of two poles, tied like shafts onto a horse, with ends dragging and the burden suspended between the poles. The Indians moved camp that-away. Frontier cavalrymen and rangers often carried wounded comrades on the travois.

[Turn page]

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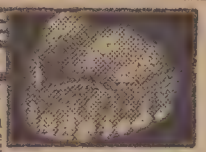

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10—a is correct. A TARP is a heavy, waterproof canvas, used to cover a pack or a ground bed in bad weather. Tarpaulin is the complete word.

11—a is correct. As most you gals and galluses know, a HONDO is the loop ring in a lariat. But like latigo, it's a common word, used to describe a bend in a river, a road or trail.

12—c is correct. A WAR BAG is a stout canvas sack which a puncher or packer lugs his extra clothes and personal belongings. Duffle bag is another name for it.

So long until next issue, pards!

—CAPTAIN STARR.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

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—THE EDITOR.

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A look that was close to amusement shone in the Ranger's grey-green eyes (CHAP. VIII)

SIX-GUN HILLS

By JACKSON COLE

Author of "Lone Star Gold," "Wild Horses," etc.

CHAPTER I

Blood on the Range

THE Sierra Roya, the Red Hills, glowed in the hot Texas sun, the beet-hued earth throwing off heat waves with the persistence of a steady coal fire. The wind blowing in from Old Mexico had the same quality, as if an oven door had been suddenly pulled open and a torrid blast of baking air had puffed out.

To Hank Vernon, however, these towering mountains of the Trans-Pecos region, with their hidden draws and sloping flanks covered by coarse grass very nutritious to cattle, were home.

He knew them and loved them as

most men love the place they have chosen in which to live.

Riding through them that warm afternoon, a couple of days after the sudden washout flood which had struck after unusual cloudbursts in the hills had subsided, he chided them, talking aloud as men do in lonely places, with a touch of dry humor characteristic of his kind.

"Oh yeah, yuh look mighty peaceful and innercint now as though butter wouldn't melt in yore mouth and yuh wouldn't think of tryin' to drown us and all our cows!"

His blue eyes, sun wrinkles at the corners, flicked toward the escarpments of the Sierra Roya, frowning battlements of rock reaching to the intense blue sky.

The man was out hunting for Circle V—his own brand—steers, which had been driven from their usual haunts by the torrential influx of water. The Diablo River, living up to its name, had gone mad and ripped away big sections of its banks, taking with it in its rush topsoil and rocks, trees and everything else in its path. Red Hills ranchers had lost many steers, and the herds had been scattered.

Hank Vernon was a rather tactiturn, rangy man, and expert with cattle and horses, which was his business. He wore leather chaps over blue jeans, and a dark shirt, open at the neck where his silk kerchief was knotted. A huge, cream-colored Stetson was strapped over his close-clipped auburn hair. The line of his curving jaw was strong and he was clean-shaven except for a bristly, confined mustache which had a reddish sheen to it. He rode his blue horse, an Arizona strain, with graceful ease. The saddle was a double-cinch affair, expensive and finely carved. The horse, Blueboy, by name, was a beautiful animal, long-limbed, slatey of hide, his glistening, healthy body showing how careful Vernon was of him.

Hank Vernon had passed the first wild flush of youth. He was twenty-five, and had been a cowhand at the age of fourteen, tearing it up on pay days in town with the rest of them. For some years he had worked at various ranches and by sheer ability had become foreman of Ban Bancroft's big spread, the Crow Foot, which dominated the Sierra Roya country.

Ellen Bancroft, five years younger than Hank, had now changed from a pig-tailed and somewhat rowdy child into a beautiful woman. The metamorphosis had astounded Vernon and when he recovered from the shock he realized that he was deeply in love with her. So he had taken his savings and bought himself a section back in the mountains, starting a small herd on it. A rancher in his own right now, though only beginning a struggle to make good, he knew that what he wanted from life was Ellen Bancroft, and he went after this with a single-minded devotion nothing could turn aside.

"Yuh might fool a pilgrim," he went on, to the Hills, "but not yores truly! Yuh set me back with that flood and I ain't forgot that landslide which carried away my haybarn two years back."

Bang-Ga ! Bang-Ga!

BLUEBOY snorted and curveted. The gunshots were easy to identify as such, for they always had that whipcrack on the end, due to echoes from the mountain walls. Vernon was almost positive it had been a big Colt revolver. It might be a Bancroft range rider out on the same mission as himself, hunting scattered steers; the cowboy might just have dispatched an injured animal. Gunshots were not unusual. Ban Bancroft's Crow Foot Ranch ran thousands of cows, and sick critters or one with broken limbs, had to be killed.

Vernon was about to ride on when he heard someone yelling from across

the intervening Diablo River and the ridges beyond. There was a certain frantic note to the cries which caused Hank to swing and ford the stream, still murky from the flood. He rode swiftly up a bushed, rocky slope; the river turned off to his left as he moved, around high crimson bluffs, and he cut that way to reach the flatlands along the banks farther on.

When he came to the ridge top and looked down he saw several men riding from the river, on past the bluffs. Two of the horsemen, carrying a limp form between them, had stopped to speak to a cowboy who sat his saddle, gesticulating at them. A pinto, with its saddle on but empty, was following them. Vernon recognized this mustang as one favored by Fred Bancroft, Ellen's older brother. He urged Blueboy over to join the party.

Their loud, angry voices came to him as he drew up. "Good night!" he muttered, realizing that the man they were supporting was Fred Bancroft.

"Hullo, Vernon," sang out a large man attired in a black suit and white shirt with a stringtie showing in the V of his coat.

"Howdy, Conroy," grunted Hank, quickly dismounting. "Is Fred Bancroft dead?"

JIM HATFIELD

"Yes, I'm afraid he is," replied Michael Conroy.

Conroy blinked regretfully. He was about 35, with a florid complexion marred by tiny broken blood vessels about his swollen nose. His eyes were jet black and very quick of movement. He had a strong chin, although the jowls were flabby, hanging beside the point. Inclined to stoutness, his thin black hair was plastered down under his straight black Stetson, over-sized

because of his bulging forehead. Yet his hands were as small as a woman's and flabby-white. Fine boots on his feet were tiny for such a big fellow.

Everybody called him "Red River" Conroy. He was a lawyer and his shingle hung out in Whiteville, the county seat. Vernon did not like him especially. But, on the other hand, he had never had anything against Conroy—up to now—preferring to avoid the entanglements of the law.

"Did you shoot him, Conroy?" inquired Vernon, the little lines deepening between his wide-set blue eyes.

"He sure did and I seen it!" cried Kansas Joe, the red-faced Crow Foot rider. He was a veteran employee of Bancroft's, having been at the spread when Vernon was foreman. Kansas Joe shifted his tobacco cut from one red, weathered cheek to the other, spat contemptuously, and went on, "Conroy, yuh drawed and fired into Fred 'thout warnin'. Murder, that's what it was."

A FLUSH of deep color stained Conroy's fishy jowls. He had a habit, when rage overcame him, of narrowing his left eye, the lid twitching, eyebrow and cheek muscles beneath it screwing up.

"That's a dirty lie! We had an argument. Fred Bancroft went for his gun and tried to kill me, but I beat him to the trigger. How could you see what happened before I shot? You were back on the ridge."

"Conroy's right," corroborated one of the fellows with the lawyer. "We seen it from the start. Bancroft got sore and dug for his hawgleg and Conroy had to pertect hisself."

The speaker was a belligerent, stocky man with legs bowed from constand clamping about a horse's ribs. He had dark, thick hair under his wide hat and very heavy black brows. The whites of his black eyes had red streaks through them, and he had not shaved for several days, the bristles sticking out straight from his accordion-pleated flesh. His wide, meaty shoulders were cased in a khaki shirt, stained with reddish clay, which also smeared his stubby hands. At his thick waist rode sagging gunbelts with .45 Colts in the holsters, Colts whose walnut stocks showed they were habitually in use. He had a small white scar across his bashed-in nose, and thick red lips, the mouth curving down. He was Dred Prescott, and the others were friends of his.

They wore the same type of clothing, cowboy garb, and they were heavily armed. Prescott had a reputation for drunken sprees and general trouble-making, and his source of income was not known.

Both Conroy and Prescott were on the prod. Hank Vernon sensed this and watched them carefully. Some distance back toward the river, at the place where Fred Bancroft had been shot, he noted more horses and a couple of flat metal tools that looked like scoops, but he was too shaken at the death of his friend to worry about anything else.

There were two bullet holes in Bancroft, a stalwart, light-haired Texan; one had passed through his brain and the other had lodged in his breast, near the heart.

"Too bad yuh had to kill him," Conroy," growled Vernon.

"Yuh makin' it yore business, Vernon?" demanded Dred Prescott, sticking out his jaw.

"I'll handle this, Dred," Conroy snapped. "I said I was sorry, Vernon. Bancroft shouldn't have tried for me. We'll take the body to town. I'll give myself up to the law."

Conroy drew himself up in a noble gesture. Vernon had an uneasy sensation, the kind he got when he stepped too close to a rattlesnake.

"Joe and I will take the body home, Conroy," Hank contradicted. "Yuh kin go to town or—"

"To blazes," finished Kansas Joe.

Conroy and Prescott scowled while Vernon tensed, ready for trouble. Kansas Joe took charge of Fred Bancroft's body, however, and Hank and the Crow Foot man were allowed to ride off toward the Bancroft ranch without a fight.

Vernon faced the unhappy task of breaking the terrible news of Fred's death to Ellen and Ban Bancroft. In-

side, Hank Vernon felt a cold, uneasy dread, as if some danger he could not foresee were threatening him.

CHAPTER II

Night Raiders

SEVERAL nights later, beneath the peaks of the Sierra Roya, a large band of horsemen waited in a draw, sitting their mustangs and staring in at the yellow-lit windows of a ranchhouse. The moon was just a glow on the horizon but the milky way showed bright, and a warm wind scudded cloud puffs along, their shadows flickering across the grassy earth.

The features of the horsemen were black blobs, not from masks but from some dark stain on the skin and their hard eyes glinted in the faint light.

A chunky man, sitting solidly in his kak, came quietly from the direction of the house they were watching. He pulled in his powerful stallion, sweeping his followers with his glance.

"We're goin' to hit Young's now, boys," he snapped. "He's too stubborn for his own good. Remember, leave nobody alive. There's six men in the bunkhouse. Young and his two sons are in the house with his old lady."

"The woman, too?" grunted a gunman.

The ferocious eyes paused for a moment on the questioner. "Yuh heard me. I said leave nobody alive. Any man who ain't got the sand kin fall out." He waited a moment, and though several shifted uncomfortably in their seats, none left the ranks.

"Lew," the leader went on, "take thirty men and hit the bunkhouse. I'll take charge of the house itself."

Soft rustling of metal brushing leather sounded as the gunmen slipped their big Colts. Then the black riders swung out into a semi-circle and headed for their victims. They drew in without any alarm being given. The range had not been warned in any way, and no special precautions were being taken by the ranchers of the Sierra Roya. The chief of the gunmen went to a window near the front of the main house. His Colt caught the light on its sheening barrel, and loaded cylinders as he took careful aim.

"They all set at the bunkhouse, Ed?" he whispered.

"Yeah, Dred, all set."

Dred Prescott's pistol aimed at the rancher inside, sitting in his chair, reading the weekly newspaper by the light of an oil lamp. Prescott raised his thumb from the hammer and the firing-pin drove home. The rancher took the slug through the head, slumping dead, chin on his breast, blood spurting from his punctured brain. The explosion reverberated in the night.

A woman's s c r e a m rose, joining the shouting triumph of the killers. From the bunkhouse, a h u n d r e d yards behind the main homestead, terrific gunfire shattered the air. Prescott's followers were thick there, outnumbering the ranch crew by five to one. They caught them in their bunks and poured vicious, killing metal into the unlucky cowboys.

More shots roared at the house. The woman no longer cried out. A couple of shots banged from inside the lighted room, the sons of the murdered rancher rushing in to see what had happened. A slug bit a chunk from Dred Prescott's Stetson, clipping his hair. He cursed, and missed his first shot at the boys, but he had plenty of able lieutenants whose Colts belched fire and death. The windows were covered and through them the black riders shot.

WITHIN a brief five minutes they had finished off the inhabitants of the ranch. The cowboys and owners lay in welters of blood. Ruthlessly the devils with blackened faces dismounted and several checked the riddled bodies to make certain none survived. While doing this, they picked up portable valuables, money, rings, which could easily be taken off.

Dred Prescott, checking up, gave a whistle, and the gunmen swiftly mounted stormed away, leaving behind them a scene of terrible carnage and horror.

For a time the renegades rode in silence. Even such hardened characters as the men Prescott had picked to follow him felt a slight squeamishness at such cold-blooded slaughter, which offered no chance of warning to the victims. However, this was soon drowned in the expectation of the profits they were to make, and by the fact that it offered little danger to the killers.

"We're goin' after Bancroft next," Dred Prescott told them after they had pounded swiftly up the river road for some miles.

Nobody objected. Rustlers by trade, they had often shot it out with pursuing cowmen. Every man there had a notch or two on his gun, meaning a man killed. Hardened to crime, they graduated easily enough to the worst excesses.

The Crow Foot was a much larger spread than Young's, the first ranch they had attacked. Many buildings stood behind the long, rambling ranchhouse, whitewashed and roomy, with a big kitchen lean-to at the rear, and bedroom wings sticking out at the sides. A roofed veranda ran around three sides of the homestead. The bunkhouse was large and capacious. Lights showed that some of the cowboys, at least, were still awake, while the many windows of the house glowed yellow in the darkness.

"I'll slip in and take a look around," Prescott growled, stopping his men out in the shadows.

He rode closer, dismounted, and crept toward the buildings. While he was at this, he heard a sudden shout from the spot where he had left his men.

"Say, what's goin' on—?"

With an irritated curse, Dred Prescott turned and rushed back to see what had occurred. Off to the right he observed a single horseman who had come in from the hill trail and chanced upon the bunched gunmen, whose blackened faces gave them away.

"Vernon!" Prescott snarled, ripping out his Colt.

Hatfield heard the shriek of the outlaw leader's bullets as he spurred forward with twin Colts flaming in his fists (CHAP. III)

He fired but Hank Vernon, quickly diagnosing the purpose of the gang he had run upon, had pulled Blueboy's reins. The swift horse moved, Prescott's slug shrieking in the air a yard from Vernon's bent head. Vernon began shouting bloody murder to warn Bancroft and the crew at the house. He shot back, and a killer took lead, crying out in sudden anguish as Vernon's bullet drove through his vitals.

Hank made the shelter of a grove of trees, around which he had ridden when he surprised Prescott's band. Bullets were hunting for him. Prescott, his face burning with fury, reached his horse and sprang to leather, cursing volubly at his men for fools.

The hubbub stirred up the Crow Foot. Cowboys snatching up shotguns and buckling on their gunbelts, roared from the bunkhouse. A giant figure, Ban Bancroft himself, shouting commands, appeared from the lighted house.

"Fire in, yuh fools!" gritted Prescott, reaching his gang.

He got them into line and they charged, shooting at the aroused ranch. Thick and fast the bullets were exchanged, and men took lead, knocked from the fray.

"Look!" exclaimed Prescott to a lieutenant. "There's Kansas Joe! If we kin knock him off it'll save drygulchin' him!"

Kansas Joe, the red-faced cowboy who had been on the ridge when Fred Bancroft had been shot, charged past the bunkhouse door, cutting loose at the attackers with a shotgun. For a brief moment his body was outlined against the yellow light, before he moved into the shadows. At Prescott's sharp command every outlaw concentrated his attention on Kansas Joe. Guns boomed savagely as the waddy tried to duck past the yellow gleam of illumination spilling from a window. Bullets tore into his body, sending him toppling to the dirt of the yard.

"That's somethin'," muttered Prescott, taking in the situation, as Ban Bancroft bellowed commands, whipping his men into fighting position.

Vernon, behind the trees, was keeping up an annoying flank fire and

harassed the outlaws with his bullets.

"This is too hot, Boss," growled a black-faced gunny.

They didn't fancy such opposition. They had done some damage but the nervy fight Bancroft was organizing did not please them. Gunmen hung back, unwilling to ride up close to the blazing weapons of the defenders.

"Come on," Prescott ordered, "we'll git 'em again, boys."

They swung away from the ranch, and avoiding Hank Vernon's position, roared away from the spot. Howls of triumph rose from the big Crow Foot as the killers retreated.

Hard riding took Prescott's crew away from the vicinity of the Crow Foot within a short space of time. They crossed the river, hiding their trail in the water for a distance, several of the men grumbling and nursing wounds received in the fight.

"What now, Dred?" a lieutenant demanded.

"It's early yet." Prescott was in a white heat of fury. "We'll go back and wipe out the Crow Foot soon, when I take on more men. Right now I'm headin' for Vernon's place in the hills and I mean to lay for him. If he don't ride home by dawn so's I kin kill him, I'll burn down his spread and git him later. He spoiled my game tonight."

"How about Lurie's ranch?"

"It's on the way to Vernon's. We'll hit it as we pass."

The night riders, with their blackened faces, were spreading death and destruction throughout the luckless ranching section.

CHAPTER III

Lone Star Ace

OLD Cap'n Bill McDowell of the Texas Rangers was bent over his desk in Austin headquarters.

"Justice is the aim of it all," he said. "That's why the Rangers ride and why the law must win. Justice! One word, but it means a lot. When it's mocked—"

His face was red and he was trying to hold in his anger, roused by the wire he had received from Hudspeth County, across the Pecos.

A rugged frontiersman, in his youth Bill McDowell had proved one of the toughest lawmen of the border country. Six feet tall and deep of chest, he was now forced by age alone to remain tied to a desk.

However, bitter as this admission of his own physical inability might be, Captain McDowell had not yet laid down his hand in the game of life. He still had aces to play in the eternal check and counter-check of the war against evil-doers preying upon the decent folk of the Lone Star State. His body might be weak but his spirit flamed as strong as ever, and his mind was keen and ready to come to grips with any problem confronting it.

Just as a panther-like tread told him the officer for whom he had sent had come to report, the gathering fury within McDowell's breast could no longer be contained, and he leaped to his feet. His greeting was explosive.

"Hatfield! Dang it, I won't have it! There'll be justice in Texas or else—"

"Yes, suh, Cap'n, that's right," a gentle voice agreed.

The owner of the drawling, soft voice loomed astonishingly large in the office doorway. Jim Hatfield, McDowell's ace of aces, and the greatest Texas Ranger of them all, stood well over six feet. His chest was broad, but he tapered to a lean waist and slim hips, adorned by blue-steel Colt .45's in black, oil-suppled holsters that would not drag when a quick draw was called for. As for swiftness, Hatfield could get those revolvers into action with blurring celerity.

McDowell knew that, just as he knew that the gentle voice belied the steel of the soul inside the great Ranger whose long arms, with slim hands hung quiescent at his leather-cased sides. Lazily, long black lashes half shaded Hatfield's eyes, which were of a peculiar grey-green that could be as sunny as a summer sea but in fighting anger darkened to the bleakness of Arctic ice. The tall man's bronzed, lean face, with its tight jaw, was some-

what relieved by a wide, good-humored mouth. He had crisp black hair under his great, curving-brimmed Stetson. His chaps and trousers, the shirt and open vest, the half-boots with big Mexican silver spurs, were entirely characteristic of the Southwest range rider, and yet—

AND yet, Jim Hatfield had a dynamic power which drew the glances of men and women. Those in his presence felt his strength; the good, with pleasure and comfort, the evil, with fear and dismay. He matched the steel and hickory of his lithe body against the outlaws of Texas; more important, his quick mind beat them in the mental conflict which always went along with the physical war.

"Hatfield," growled McDowell, "there's a miscarriage of justice claimed way over in Hudspeth, west of the Pecos. Ban Bancroft, who owns the Crow Foot Ranch thataway, sent me this wire. I savvy Ban. He's one of the pioneers in that section. His son Fred was shot and killed by an hombre named Conroy, a Whiteville lawyer. A witness who seen it, one of Bancroft's cowboys, was murdered 'fore the trial began, and Conroy's pards have sworn themselves blue in the face to save him. There's bin intimidation, too, threats against the jury and witnesses on Ban's side. And other complaints have come in from them parts.

"It seems a gang of gunslicks who black their faces and ride at night have attacked ranchers, killing, burnin' and stealin' as they please. Sheriff Tim Williams has his headquarters at Whiteville, the county seat. Tim used to be a good man, and yuh kin trust him. I remember him when—"

McDowell broke off, frowning. He hated to admit he was getting old himself. Figuring how many years it was since he had seen Tim Williams, he thought the sheriff might be getting along some.

"I'll be on my way, Cap'n," said Hatfield in the same soft way.

"Remember," grunted McDowell, "the Rangers dispense justice. It kin come from a fancy court, jedge and blue-ribbon jury that eats chicken and waffles while its considerin' the verdict—or it kin come outa the muzzle of this!" The grizzled chief patted an old Frontier Model Colt .44 that lay on his desk, his war gun.

The corners of Hatfield's wide mouth turned up a bit, and he shook hands, started out.

McDowell stepped into the sunshine and watched him mount the magnificent golden gelding awaiting the tall man.

"Fetch him back, Goldy," warned McDowell, and the handsome sorrel shook his long mane as if he understood.

Hatfield patted his pet's arched neck, and swung his long leg over, settling firmly in the leather seat. He was more at home on a horse than afoot. Goldy danced for a moment, then started off at a slow pace which would increase as the animal's muscles limbered up. Under the man's leg rode a Winchester rifle in a sling. Hidden beneath his fresh blue shirt, in a snug inner pocket, rode the silver star on silver circle, emblem of the Texas Ranger. . . .

The Pecos lay far behind Jim Hatfield, and the rolling tableland was cut by sharp battlements of vari-colored rock, red, yellow, grey. The earth was dry and sandy for the most part on this wild plateau where the creeks had cut deep canyons on their way to join the black-watered Pecos. Cactus forms grew on the flats and Yucca, catclaw, bayonet, creosote and other aromatic plants that preferred the hot, arid climate, fought for a foothold.

A film of dust dulled the sorrel's sheening hide. The Ranger, his far-seeing eyes watching the sky ahead, was a bit thinner of face from the swift run to the heart of the reported trouble, but both the rider and the horse were in fighting trim.

SWINGING past the high bluffs, they saw the small caravan, its presence betrayed to the Ranger's shrewd eye by the winging of birds in the heavens, plodding toward them. There were two wagons. One was

piled high with furniture. The other carried food and water and personal belongings, and on the wide seat rode a middle-aged woman and a young man. Out on the flanks were two horsemen, fellows of around fifty, bearded of face, seamed of hide, ranchers from the look of them.

They returned Hatfield's greetings politely and offered him a drink from their water barrels, and a snack.

"I'm on my way to Whiteville," the Ranger replied, in answer to a question put by one of the men. "Yuh come from there?"

"Yeah—we're from near there, anyways. My brother Ollie and me run a ranch in the Sierra Roya kentry, mister." A troubled look clouded the speaker's blue eyes, seamed by the sun. Glances were exchanged by the others. John Phillips, the elder of the brother ranchers, cleared his throat and went on, "I hope yuh won't think I'm hornin' in where I ain't wanted, mister, but yuh ain't figgerin' on settlin' over there, are yuh?"

Behind the wagons the sun was lowering in the azure sky. It caught the tips of the Sierra Roya, red as blood.

"I might be," drawled Hatfield. "Why, Phillips?"

"We just sold out there," Phillips went on quickly, blinking. He seemed apprehensive. "We didn't want to. The range is okay and we were makin' money. However, when this Conroy snake offered me cash, I grabbed it."

"Yuh know we didn't get what the spread was wuth, Jawn," growled Ollie, spitting angrily. "Feller, take my advice and turn round and git. There's a passel of killers ridin' the range over thataway and it ain't healthy in them parts."

"What about the sheriff? Can't he do nuthin'?"

"Shux. Williams is too old to do more'n nurse his rheumatiz. It's no place to try to settle, though, and range ridin' is too dangerous."

The Phillips were on their way out for good. They could tell little more, to add to what Hatfield already knew. He thanked them, touched his Stetson brim to the silent woman, and rode on. From what they said, he had about thirty more miles to go, and he decided to keep on until nine or ten that night.

Darkness cloaked the land after a glorious exhibition of colors over the mountain range ahead. Up and up, the golden sorrel climbed to a high plateau from which the Red Hills grew. It was about eight-thirty, he figured by the stars, when Goldy rippled his hide and snuffled softly.

Somebody was approaching, the scent brought by the breeze. Hatfield slowed a little, his keen ears alert, and presently he caught the muffled beat of hoofs. The sound grew in volume until he realized that a score or more horsemen were approaching at a rapid pace. He pulled back off the tail, just for ordinary precaution, and dismounted, touching Goldy's muzzle to warn him to keep quiet.

A MAN, riding low over a big black horse, swept past with two more close at his heels. Then came a huge bunch massed together, pounding at great speed along the out-trail. Hatfield could see the sides of their faces, shaded by strapped Stetson brims. They were black blobs, not masked but stained with some dark substance. The dust rose in a thick curtain from the tearing hoofs, and then they were past and swinging around the turn.

"The black riders," he mused. "Must be a passel of 'em! Bancroft mentioned 'em. Where are they bound at sich a time?"

He hadn't passed a settlement for sixty miles; the only thing was that Phillips caravan—

He frowned as he remounted, and took the trail again. However, instead of continuing on toward Whiteville, he picked up speed, following the gang.

Several of them rode a quarter mile behind the leaders so that he could not press them too closely. The wagons traveled much more slowly than fast mustangs could run. While a horse might do seventy or eighty miles in a day, a wagon would average but three or four miles per hour, with stops to grease axles and for

meals. It was only about four hours since he had passed the Phillips' train. Suddenly, after a quick dash in the risen dust of the black riders', perhaps six miles from the spot where he had turned the Ranger heard heavy gunshots.

Hatfield increased the pace of his mount, racing toward the startling sounds. A woman was screaming in the night, a high-pitched, terror-stricken cry that never abated. Punctuating her call, came the booming bursts of a dozen guns, with now and then a single report. The caravan had stopped shortly after Hatfield had passed them, camped for the night by a small waterhole, and the gunmen had now reached them.

Hatfield flashed up, taking in the circular meadow by the trail, with the shapes of the wagons looming black in the dark. All seemed confusion there. The blue-yellow flashes of exploding Colts made startling streamers of color, giving him brief glimpses of blackened faces of mounted men swarming about the camp. Raucous yells blended with the banging guns.

Colts unsheathed and ready, Hatfield tore into the melee. It was easy to pick the attackers. He knew that the Phillips were decent people, and that this horrible massacre was the kind of affair which had stricken the district he had come to pacify.

He was almost upon them before they realized they had another and tougher opponent with whom to deal. A Ranger bullet ripped into a Stetson crown, passing through the head inside it and instantly killing.

THE outlaw fell from the leaping mustang, which dashed off leaving the body quivering on the ground. A second renegade drilled through the ribs and terribly wounded, slumped and seized his saddle-horn.

"Hey, what in tarnation's all this?"

The stentorian bellows was that of a leader, and drew the Ranger's attention. He saw a squat man, who was off his waiting horse, at the rear of a wagon. He had a Colt in one hand and, stuffing something hastily in his pocket, he sprang from the backboard of the wagon to a spot by a high wheel, firing at the swift-moving Ranger figure.

Hatfield heard the close shriek of the outlaw leader's bullets as he spurred forward with twin Colts flaming in his fists. A slug hit the steel wheel rim, sparks flying, fragments cutting the blackened cheek of the leader. The latter jumped back, crouching in cover.

"Git that skunk! He's hornin' in!" he shrieked to his many followers.

They concentrated on Hatfield, who flashed across the clearing and turned the golden gelding in the shelter of the trees. He roared back, Colts again laden with death.

"C'mon, Pressie, it's all settled," a black-faced devil howled, cursing with anguish as he felt a Ranger slug tear the flesh of his gun arm.

Before Hatfield's onslaught they turned, evidently having won their objective and unwilling to fight such a foe as the Ranger. Blood seeped from a slight wound in his thigh, but

[*Turn page*]

the injury did not slow him up. Using shadows and spots of cover, he ripped the outlaws with his fire. Presently, the squat, black-faced chief leaped on his dark stallion and spurred away into the chaparral, his men all around him, howling, cursing, sending volleys back at the single champion who had routed them.

CHAPTER IV

Trial for Life

HATFIELD, victorious in the swift night clash, carefully approached the shattered camp. A woman was moaning inside a wagon, as he dismounted on the dark side of the vehicle. The gang had drawn off, leaving the field to the Ranger, whose face was sharply grim as he stalked to the back of the cart, to see Mrs. Phillips lying across the body of her husband, who was riddled with bandit lead. Her son lay dead close at hand, and Ollie Phillips, the brother was breathing his last on the ground nearby.

"Mrs. Phillips, yuh'd better ride with me," Hatfield began gently.

Her eyes were wide, staring as she glanced his way.

"They—they were after—the money—they took it—all our savings as well as the—the five thousand we got for selling—our spread. The black riders . . . "

Her mind was stricken by the awful tragedy. She could not continue and sank suddenly in a dead faint.

Hatfield checked the corpses, one eye warily watching for a return of the enemy. But they had enough of his guns, and had taken what they sought—Phillips' moneybelt. John Phillips' shirt had been ripped half off him, and the reddened circle where the belt had been fastened next to his skin was still visible.

There was nothing more that he could do now so he lifted the unconscious woman from the wagon and set her before him on Goldy, starting westward for Whiteville.

Slowed by the extra weight of the woman, and by his caution against possible ambush by the renegades who had killed the men of the Phillips clan, it was well after sunup when the Ranger trotted Goldy into the settlement of Whiteville.

It had a windswept plaza, with a few anemic bushes fringing the open space; a Southwest town would be impossible without such a commons. Frame buildings, some with false second-story fronts, stood on the four sides of the plaza. Eight were saloons. There was also a drugstore, a hardware shop and groceries and drygoods emporiums. A hay-and-grain merchant had his quarters attached to the big livery stable, a corral at its rear. Tailing from these centrally located structures were private homes, many of adobe-mud bricks, while the southern flange was obviously the Mexican quarters.

Whiteville possessed the same forlorn air to it that many Southwest towns had, but it was a bit different from others, since it was the county seat. A large, square building with wide, low steps leading up to the double doors, of solid adobe construction occupied a corner of the plaza, while next to the courthouse was the sheriff's office, the lockup with its barred windows at one side.

Hatfield dismounted in front of a good-sized home and carefully lifted down the half conscious, stricken woman. A man answered his knock. A woman showed in the room behind him, and they exclaimed with pity as they saw Mrs. Phillips. They knew her, and the wife took charge of her.

Free to go about his business, Hatfield left her in these kind hands. He had ridden from early dawn the previous day, through the night after the ruckus at the wagon camp. Beyond Whiteville loomed the Sierra Roya, wooded shanks and colored spires gleaming in the new light.

He went first to the livery stable where Goldy was rubbed down, and carefully fed. He cleaned up, had

breakfast at an eating place that was always open, then went over to the sheriff's office.

A man dozing in a chair, feet on the table, started up at Hatfield's touch on his shoulder. He was wearing dirty corduroy pants tucked into worn, muddy knee-boots, a sweated, torn blue shirt and a moth-eaten vest. A cartridge belt with a smooth-handled Colt sagged at his burly hip, and his pearl-grey, greasy Stetson lay on the table. He had rusty-brown, dry hair, a pock-marked complexion, and close-set amber eyes.

"Huh!" he grunted, licking his dry lips and blinking at the Ranger. "Who are yuh?"

"Is Sheriff Williams around?" asked Hatfield softly.

"No, he ain't. It's early. He's tied up anyways, all night. But I'm his deputy."

"So I see." Hatfield's grey-green eyes touched the badge pinned on one side of the man's vest. He knew Williams, from what McDowell said, must be a much older man.

"Yuh kin give yore complaint to me," the deputy went on, feet banging on the floor as he yawned. "I'm Officer Dave Hurley. I do most of the work since the sheriff's crippled up with lumbago lot of the time."

Hurley didn't impress Hatfield very much. He was dirty, and boastful, too cocksure of himself.

"I'll be back later," Hatfield said. "Do yuh reckon Williams will be in by nine?"

"I don't reckon nuthin'," Hurley replied insolently, trying to stare the tall man down. "Who are yuh and what do yuh want?"

"I'll be back when Williams is here," replied Hatfield in a gentle voice.

He waited a moment, gazing frigidly at Hurley. The deputy evidently resented him, but thought twice about starting a fuss, as he took in the rippling power and size of the Ranger, and the black-stocked Colts in supple sheaths.

Sleep was tugging at Hatfield's eyelids. He figured it would be a couple of hours before Williams might reasonably be expected in, and the town to be fully awake. Retiring to the livery stable, he found a soft spot in a hayloft where he could have a nap.

When he awoke it was nearly nine o'clock. A murmur had risen over Whiteville, and now and then a child shouted or a man's voice could be heard above the general hum. Sprucing up, Hatfield went out to the street, crossing the plaza toward the courthouse. A crowd had collected outside, some standing on the wide steps. The doors were open. Horses, saddle animals, and others attached to wagons and buggies, stood around.

A DOZEN men, with an oldster limping along behind them, emerged from a hotel and crossed toward the courthouse. The sun, now completely yellow, and well up in the sky, flashed on a five-pointed star pinned to the elderly man's vest.

"That'll be Sheriff Williams, I reckon," decided Hatfield.

The murmur rose to an excited clamor as the twelve men and single officer pushed through to the step. A harsh, angry voice came from the crowd on the other side from the Ranger, shouted: "Keerful now, jury! Yuh'll answer to us if yuh do Conroy wrong!"

Williams swung quickly about, scowling, hand dropping to his gun. The jury walked on, and the sheriff passed inside with them. But he evidently turned them over to other guardians, for he soon emerged, blinking under his rusty Stetson set on thin white locks. He had a spade, completely white, and a flowing mustache above his thin lips. But as Hatfield came closer, he saw that the light-blue eyes were rheumy, the hands thin and blue-veined with age.

"Why, he's older'n McDowell!" thought Hatfield.

No matter how much spirit such a man had, he could never stand the pace in an emergency of any size. He limped over and went into his office, while Hatfield pushed toward the spot.

"What's goin' on, mister?" Hatfield

inquired of a cowboy. "I just blew in."

"Huh? Oh, that's the jury. They're been locked up under guard all night. Reckon they're ready to give their verdict."

"What is it, rustlin'?"

"No. Murder. Lawyer named Mike Conroy accused of killin' Fred Bancroft, a rancher's son. Been an excitin' trial. They say that some witnesses was killed—" The man stopped, shrugged, and turned away.

As Hatfield started into the sheriff's office, Deputy Hurley emerged, nearly bumping into him. Hurley scowled at him, but gave way, and the Ranger went on into the main room, where he found the weary looking Williams sitting at his desk.

The coast seemed clear. Hatfield drew from its secret pocket the silver star on silver circle, emblem of the Texas Rangers.

"I'm from McDowell's office, Sheriff. I'm down here on a complaint from Ban Bancroft and some others. I'm Jim Hatfield."

Tim Williams held out his thin hand. "Glad to meet yuh, Hatfield. I've heard of yore work. But there's a powerful big bite here in the county. There's a passel of gunnies ridin' the Sierra Roya. They blacken their faces and raid ranches. We ain't been able to come up with 'em. Conroy's guilty, in my opinion, but a dozen men swear he ain't. Kansas Joe, the chief witness against Conroy, was killed. And the jury's been threatened, though I ain't been able to prove anything about that either."

"I ran into those black riders yuh mention," Hatfield went on.

HE proceeded to tell the startled sheriff of the terrible fight in which the Phillips had been destroyed. Williams had been a friend of the dead men, and was greatly disturbed at the news.

"They've gone too far," he cried. But he had no remedy for checking outlawry, nor could he say where the bandits hid out.

"I'd like to look things over," cautioned Hatfield, "before folks savvy who I am."

"Okay, Ranger. I'll tell nobody but Hurley, my deputy."

"Don't tell even Hurley. Now, did yuh arrest this Mike Conroy, the one who killed young Bancroft?"

"Yeah—leastways, Conroy came to my office and surrendered. I charged him and locked him up. It looked like Fred had been murdered. The state had a strong case, but the chief witness, Kansas Joe, was downed in a gun battle, and Conroy's friends rallied around him."

"I heard someone yell a threat at the jury as they went in to give their verdict."

"Yeah, me too. It was that sidewinder Dred Prescott, a pard of Conroy's."

"Any other witnesses against Conroy?"

"Only Hank Vernon. And Vernon's lucky he's still kickin'. His house was burned one night and the black riders have been gunnin' for him. He's stayed at Bancroft's since then."

"Conroy must savvy what's goin' on," mused Hatfield. "I want a peek at him, and—"

He broke off, rising quickly, then went on talking in the same tone, "But maybe I'm wrong. Conroy's prob'ly innocent if the jury let him off—"

Now he was at the door, and he kicked it hard with his big boot toe.

"Ow-w!" a harsh voice cried. "What's the idea?"

The door had hit Deputy Hurley in the nose, knocking him halfway down the steps.

Hatfield coolly regarded Hurley as he picked himself up, dusting off his clothing.

"Sorry! I didn't savvy yuh had yore face so close to the keyhole, Hurley," he said softly.

Hurley scowled. He rubbed his nose and pushed in past Hatfield as a shout lifted from the men in front of the courthouse.

"I reckon the jury done give its verdict, Sheriff," Hurley stated.

Hurley was grinning now. He

looked around at the Ranger, slouched against the wall close to the open door. His eyes held a triumphant glow and Hatfield had a hunch that Hurley knew who and what he was. While talking confidently to Williams he had caught a slight sound outside and had booted the door quickly open. He was certain that the deputy had been eavesdropping.

A huge Texan, quite evidently a cowman, in halfboots, leather pants and shirt, bandanna at the neck, a ten-gallon sombrero on his light-haired head, his big rugged face red as a beet with rage, came stalking across the plaza to the office. Behind him trailed a dozen armed cowboys. A strong-jawed young man with a close-clipped, reddish mustache, walked beside the rancher.

"They let him off! They let that smooth-tongued, lyin' son of a side-winder off!" the big man blared. "He murdered my son, and they let him go free. I want him arrested and tried again, Tim!"

"Yuh can't try a man mor'n once for the same killin'," said Williams uncomfortably.

"Yeah? Well, *I* kin! I'll see that Conroy pays!"

"Keerful, Bancroft," warned Dave Hurley, "or yuh'll find yoreself on trial for murder. Conroy's been cleared by a jury of his peers. He shot yore son in self-defense."

BAN BANCROFT'S eyes flashed hotly. "Kansas Joe never lied to me. Conroy murdered Fred. This country's ruined. Folks're killed or run out. But not me. I'll fight to the last ditch." He scowled at everybody in the office, including the tall man by the door. "Who's that?" he demanded.

"Oh, a friend of mine," Williams said, blinking.

"My name is Jim Hays," Hatfield explained quickly, to save Williams a slip. "My dad worked with Tim years ago. Dad sent me over here to see if I could land a deputy job. But there's no openin' right now. I reckon I'll hang around a while, then

Vernon knelt beside Bancroft who was unconscious (CHAPTER VIII)

if nothin' breaks, I'll mosey on to El Paso."

Ban Bancroft weighed the cool fighting man. No one could look upon Hatfield without being impressed by his potential power.

"If yuh want a fight, Hays, I'll give yuh a job. I'm lookin' for good men. Once I git on the trail of them dirty, murderin' riders who black their faces and shoot up honest folks in the night, I'll show 'em what fightin' is!"

"Thanks. I may take yuh up, Bancroft."

The rangy young man who had come in with the Crow Foot chief stepped forward.

"This is a terrible miscarriage of justice, Sheriff," said Hank Vernon calmly. "I didn't see the actual shooting but I know Fred Bancroft wasn't the sort he was made out to be at the trial. Conroy's gotten away with murder."

Quick steps made them look at the open door. Bancroft's cheeks flushed several shades darker at sight of the man who entered. Behind him trooped a number of grinning, heavily armed fellows who were clapping him on the back and congratulating him.

"Conroy! Yuh dirty dawg," shouted Ban Bancroft. "Draw and fight like a man!"

CHAPTER V

Big Job

BAN BANCROFT, crazed at the sight of his son's killer, spread his booted feet wide, his hands hanging limp at his hips.

The men with Red River Mike Conroy were armed with two Colts each, their strapped, crossed cartridge belts glistening in the morning light. They bunched in behind Conroy, while Hank Vernon and the Crow Foot cowboys tensed, ready for a fight.

Hatfield's quick eye caught the movement of Dave Hurley's hand to his gun as the deputy made a draw. But Hurley wasn't watching Conroy. He had his gaze riveted on Bancroft, whose back was turned to the deputy as he glared at the lawyer. A sly gleam was in Hurley's expression, and Hatfield suspected that while the others were not looking his way, the deputy meant to put a slug into Bancroft. But the Ranger reached out, got his wrist, and with a twist sent his Colt clattering to the floor. He flung Hurley back against the wall and stepped in between Conroy and Bancroft.

"Hold it, gents," he drawled.

He was interested in Conroy. The lawyer was around thirty-five, his florid complexion marred by broken blood vessels about his swollen nose. He had quick, jet-black eyes and a strong chin spoiled by fleshy jowls.

"I have no gun on, Bancroft," Conroy murmured, his left eye twitching. "Sorry you won't believe me when I say I shot your son in self-defense."

"Say, what's the idea of throwin' me around thataway?" yelped Hurley. He had felt, for an instant, the vise-like grip of Hatfield's slim hand and it had frightened him.

"Sorry, my foot slipped," the Ranger told him.

"I was on'y goin' to git the drop on 'em and make 'em behave," added the deputy aggrievedly.

Hatfield's action had checked the fight. Bancroft, with an explosive curse, started for the exit.

"Lemme outa here," he snarled. "I hate the smell of skunk."

He stamped from the office, trailed by his men. Conroy's followers, smiling on open triumph, made way.

"Too bad," clucked Conroy, shaking his head. "I can't convince Bancroft of my sincerity. Well, Sheriff, I just stepped into thank you for all your kindness to me while I was locked up. Drinks are on me now, I reckon, and if you'll all step over to the Gilt Edge, I'll set 'em up."

Hatfield was aware of the sharp black eyes upon him. There was a calculating expression in Conroy's glance. He was shrewd and trained

in sizing up men. A trial lawyer had to be. Hatfield tried to look as harmless as possible. He wasn't sure of his ground yet and did not wish to attract too much attention.

"That was fast work," Conroy praised. "You're mighty quick, and thanks for checking that fight. If you feel like it, come over and have a drink with the others."

"Don't mind if I do," drawled Hatfield.

Red River Conroy interested him deeply. He sensed the lawyer's mental strength, and, so far as he could guess at this stage, Conroy had got-

all the way to the rear at the right, with half a dozen barmen in white aprons on duty. A long mirror, its wooden edges painted with shining gilt, reflected the bottles and glasses and the faces of the devotees lined along the counter.

Hatfield took in the grinning men who trooped along with Mike Conroy. They wore range clothing, but their guns and general manner seemed different from the usual run of cowboy. There was a certain cocksure air about them, and their eyes were quick in movement, watching, weighing those about them.

The Ranger lifted the girl over the top of the fence (CHAPTER XVI)

ten away with a cold-blooded murder. No motive had been brought forth for the shooting for Fred Bancroft by Conroy.

"When I find why he did it," mused Hatfield, as he trailed the crowd over to the Gilt Edge Saloon and Gambling Hall, "things 'll be a lot clearer."

THE Gilt Edge was a large, square building with an annex in which gamblers plied their trade at night. It was too early for much gaming but drinking started before breakfast. The bar ran from the street windows

A stocky man with legs bowed from habitual hugging of a horse's ribs, and dark, thick hair under his wide hat and heavy black brows entered. Bristles stuck out from his determined chin, and his wide, meaty shoulders were covered by a khaki shirt. His vest flapping open, brushed against his heavy .45's. He pushed in beside the lawyer to bend his elbow, light striking the crisscross scar on the bridge of his flat nose.

Hatfield was some distance down the bar, the crush keeping him from Conroy. He did not wish to risk draw-

ing undue attention by shoving in. There was a citizen next him, however, a typical barfly, and the Ranger asked softly, "Who's that stocky hombre, mister?"

"Huh?" The man seemed startled for a moment, as he blinked at Hatfield. "Why,—oh, yuh're a stranger, ain't yuh? That's Dred Prescott."

Prescott said something in Conroy's ear. He had two quick drinks, nodded, and left the Gilt Edge. Hurley hadn't come over to the saloon at all, and the Ranger wondered where the deputy was. A judge of men, he knew that Hurley was an habitual drinker.

"Set 'em up and send the bill over to my office, Jake," sang out Conroy. "I'll be back directly." He raised his hand jovially and went out.

Hatfield strolled to the big front window. He saw Conroy turn into a building up the street. There was a painted sign out front which read: MICHAEL CONROY, ATT'Y AT LAW. LAND TITLES. DEEDS.

On the ground floor was a vacant store, windows murky with cobwebs and dust. The lawyer's offices occupied the second story and was reached by a flight of wooden steps at the right.

"Dred Prescott," Hatfield repeated to himself. "He's a tough lookin' customer." In his brain was imprinted the experience on the trail, when he had tried to save the Phillips from the horrible attack of the black-faced riders. He had heard a killer yell 'Pressie' in the excitement of the battle. It might be a nickname for Prescott.

"That outlaw leader had the same build as Prescott as far as I could make out," Hatfield decided. "It won't hurt to check up."

DEPUTY HURLEY was waiting for Red River Conroy in the latter's office as the attorney opened the door and stepped in. Hurley couldn't sit still. He acted as if the chair seat were filled with pins and needles.

"What's wrong, Hurley?" demanded Conroy. Off guard, the oily exterior had left him, and he seemed viciously sharp. "Dred says you have something vitally important to tell me."

Prescott seated acrooss the room, glared at Hurley, but kept his mouth shut. The office was crammed with tables, desks and chairs. Papers and files stood about in untidy confusion, and a clock beat time near the front windows.

"I'll say I've got somethin' important to tell yuh," gasped Hurley. "That tall jigger who spoiled my game when I tried to plug Bancroft at the office is a Texas Ranger!"

Conroy digested this. He did not appear alarmed. "What of it?"

"What of it? Don't yuh know the Rangers are tough meat to chaw on, Conroy? Especially a sample like this Jim Hatfield. I heard of him. He's dangerous."

"Pull yourself together," ordered Conroy sharply. "After all, the Rangers are only men like us. I've expected they might come over here. This one's probably an advance scout, to check up before the troop appears. I'll handle him."

But Hurley could not be reassured. "Yuh feel that grip of his once and yuh'll change yore tune, Conroy. He nearly busted my wrist when he grabbed me. And he caught me listenin' at the door. That's how come I savvy he's a Ranger. He told Williams to keep it under his hat."

Conroy stepped over and patted Deputy Hurley on the shoulder. "Take it easy, my boy. I'll prove to you your fears are groundless."

"Yeah? How?"

"I'll let you shoot Ranger Hatfield."

Hurley jumped. "Like heck you will," he snapped. "I ain't facin' him again. He'd have a bullet in my belly 'fore my Colt cleared leather!"

"You wouldn't be afraid to shoot him if he didn't even know you were going to do it, would you?" Conroy asked, grinning.

"Mebbe not. But how?"

Conroy was very persuasive. His voice was convincing and soft.

"Step over her to the window, Dave. See the Chinaman's roof? It's got a pagoda on top, and behind it is a flat space where a man could lie without being seen from the street. If you were up there, you could stick a gun

through one of those side holes and pick off a man standing at the bottom of my steps quite easily."

"Yeah, that's true. But how are yuh goin" to git that Ranger to stand there where I kin hit him?"

"I guarantee he will be there within an hour. Make your way around to the alley, and set yourself."

"Okay," agreed Hurley, his lips trembling. "I'll do it. But if he ain't right in front of your office, I won't try for him, Conroy."

"He'll be there. Now go out the back way and don't let anyone see you getting up on the Chinaman's roof."

As the shaken deputy left by the rear steps, Conroy came back to Prescott.

"He's gone," growled Dred.

Conroy nodded. "Completely lost his nerve over this Ranger. He won't be worth a nickel to us from now on. He'll cry his heart out on that Ranger's shoulder the first chance he gets."

"He savvies too much."

CONROY led Prescott to the front window again.

"Do you see that open window in the warehouse, Dred? The Chinaman's roof is low. That window is up above it, but it's hidden from the street by that false front. When Hurley shoots a man in that window could get him without any trouble."

Prescott's sullen face lighted, and he laughed. "Chief, yuh're a card! I wondered what it was all about, yore settin' Hurley to pick off that big jigger. Now I savvy."

"Hurley's more dangerous to us right now than Hatfield. We'll take on the Ranger tonight or tomorrow in case Hurley misses. At that, we may get two buzzards with one rock."

"Somethin' else Hurley told me," growled Prescott. "This Ranger is the skunk who horned in when we hit Phillips on his way out. He downed a couple of my boys for good."

Conroy jumped. A red glow, like hot coals, came into his jet-black eyes.

"You're not tellin' me you didn't get what you went after?"

Prescott grinned. He reached in an inside pocket and took out a wallet, crammed with money, which he tossed on the table. "I got it 'fore he come up. Almost eight thousand there. We finished off the men, too. I don't see how he could've recognized me in the dark, blacked up the way I was. I'll see he pays for that fun he had.

"Leave that to me. We've got to move carefully. You keep away from town after this play. If you must come in, do it at night and come through the back way. There's too much in it for us to slip. You hear from Gonzales?"

"Yeah. He'll be at camp day after tomorrow with seventy men."

"Good. Added to your bunch, we can wipe up the whole county with that many fighters. All we need is two or three days to get set. No doubt if Hurley don't get him, this Ranger will try to whip up folks against us. I'll guarantee to keep him occupied till Gonzales and you are ready. Get going. When you're through with Hurley, ride out of town. I'll step back to the Gilt Edge and draw Hatfield into position."

CHAPTER VI

Bullet Trap

JIM HATFIELD saw Conroy returning to the saloon, and he took his place again at the bar. The lawyer came stolling in, smiling blandly, nodding to friends. Neither Prescott nor Hurley was in sight.

"That deputy knows plenty," thought Hatfield. "I'll catch him alone tonight and he'll squeal like a pig."

He attended to his drink, although he watched Conroy in the bar mirror. After a time, he found the lawyer moving toward him. Conroy was crossing over to the lunch counter. He paused, nodding genially to the tall man.

"Come over and have a bite," he invited.

"Don't care if I do."

Hatfield picked up his glass and

walked to the table on the other side of the bar, where ham, sausage, and bread, pickles and mustard were spread out.

Conroy's face was serious now. He began to munch bread and boiled ham, blinking at Hatfield.

"You know, Hays, the more I see of you the better I like you. That play at the sheriff's was one of the quickest I ever saw. I think I could use you. Bancroft is determined to kill me because I shot his son."

"I dunno much about it," replied Hatfield, "havin' jist got to town, Conroy. After all, the jury let yuh go."

"Yes. That makes Bancroft all the sorer. You heard his threats. I need a bodyguard and I'll pay well. One hundred a month. What do you say?"

"I'll take it. When do I start?"

"From now on. It's only temporary, you understand. In a month or so, Bancroft should cool off. I've got a lot of work to do. It's piled up since I was arrested. Come along and I'll tell you what to do."

Hatfield strolled outside with the stout attorney. He was turning this play over in his quick mind, trying to decide what Conroy's game might be. The lawyer was a fluent talker and kept up a running fire of patter, distracting the Ranger's mind.

He was starting on a dangerous trail, and had already made some progress, although he had nothing very definite. He was positive Conroy was a slippery customer, and was allied with Dred Prescott. Prescott, unless coincidence had played a startling trick, knew something of the black riders. And then, there was Deputy Hurley, no doubt very useful to them all in supplying information as to Sheriff Williams' movements.

The two men reached the foot of the stairs leading to Conroy's office. The wooden awning gapped close at hand, due to a narrow alley used by wagons in making deliveries to the back door of the main street buildings.

"You stick here, Jim," ordered Conroy. "Don't let anybody up these stairs without calling to me so I can identify him."

"Okay, Boss."

Hatfield understood the game now. Conroy had not climbed three steps before the Ranger's grey-green eyes began hunting for the vantage point from which the drygulcher was supposed to shoot him. He knew at once that Conroy had put him on the spot, and he was ready for the attack.

"Maybe I give Conroy credit for too much brains," he mused. "This is as raw as uncooked steak!"

He found that his back was perfectly safe, against the blank walls. The dirty windows of the vacant store under the lawyer's office could not be utilized by a gunman unless the latter should stick out his head and shoulders. The little alley was clear, with no window in the saloon wall that covered his position as he lounged by the entry.

HE glanced across the street. The plaza was a hundred yards wide, not too long a shot. There were open saloons over there, and between them a dark-looking, barn-like warehouse with padlocked front doors. Squeezed in between a saloon and the warehouse was a rickety wooden shack with a low roof. This drew Hatfield's attention. Surmounting the place which housed a Chinaman's laundry, was a blank-faced pagoda which apparently cut off the roof from the street.

Unable to pick the obvious strategic point from which the attack he expected would come, the Ranger drew out tobacco and cigarette papers. He rolled a quirly, using this as an excuse to shift his position a bit.

As he lighted up, however, his attention was attracted by a bright flash from behind the pagoda on the laundry roof. "That's too much for a gun barrel," he muttered, moving again.

But no shot came. Puzzled, Hatfield stared at the blank face of the pagoda, whereupon the instantaneous flash came again, blinding him for a brief moment, as if someone had caught his eyes with a mirror held to the sun.

He was ready, then, and warned, when from the apparently solid front of the pagoda a Colt muzzle was

thrust. He jumped aside, whipping his pistol out, cocking it as it rose in his fist. A heavy bullet hit the wooden wall where he had stood a moment before. Splinters flipped up into the air and the report banged over the plaza.

Almost on the heels of this the Ranger heard what sounded like an echo from the other side of the way, just as he let go at the spot in the pagoda where he spotted the drygulcher's pistol. His .45 flamed. Then the Colt held by the invisible enemy roared again—wildly this time—the slug shattering a window off to the Ranger's right. Crouched so he commanded the point from which his assailant was aiming, Hatfield thumbed two more bullets at the target offered by the Colt.

On his second try, he hit the other man's weapon and it sagged, downward, sticking there without moving.

Men were running up, or peeking from the saloon windows and doors to see what was up. The Ranger, keeping his blue-steel Colt in one hand, jumped forth and ran down the covered walk. He ducked under the hitch-rail and hurried across the plaza in the open now, but determined to have it out with his attacker.

He hit the laundry door hard and burst inside. The little front room was empty as he vaulted over the counter. A pair of legs stuck out close at hand and he seized the ankles, hauling out the Chinese laundryman, who stared at him in teeth-chattering fright.

"Who's on yore roof?" demanded Hatfield, but the Chinaman only blinked in fear.

Hatfield dropped him and pushed on through to Tin Can Alley. Next to the laundry rose a big, barnlike warehouse. There was some fresh-risen dust leading off from behind it, down a narrow street, but no one was in sight. The laundry roof was low, and a flight of rickety wooden steps led up to it.

PAYING no attention to the rising cries in the plaza, Hatfield went up and looked over the top of the roof, ready for trouble. His swift eyes checked the surroundings. There was a side window in the warehouse, open a foot from the bottom, looking down on the laundry roof. The pagoda loomed up at the front of the Chinaman's store. It was chiefly front, and at this angle he could see slivers of light from the slanting slits, one of which the drygulcher had utilized in trying for him. A man lay up there, on his face, legs drawn up. The Colt butt with the long barrel thrust in the slit, was visible above his out-

[*Turn page*]

stretched hand. The Ranger stepped over, his weight shaking the flimsy roof. Squatting by the body, recognized the fellow as he turned him over. It was Deputy Hurley, the sheriff's chief aid.

"Blast my hide, if he didn't try for me mighty quick," muttered Hatfield.

His grey-green eyes darkened as he moved to the slit. He found that from this angle he could command the entire area in front of Conroy's office stairs. Because the wood was not cut straight through, but on a bias, the black-painted splits in the pagoda were invisible from below.

Lawyer Conroy was crossing the plaza, a number of other citizens about him. The Ranger was sure that the attorney had placed him on that spot for Hurley to kill. His fingertips, as he touched Hurley's gun, came away black. The barrel had been sooted in a candle flame to prevent telltale flashes catching it. Searching around under the edge of the pagoda, he found a whiskey flask, three-quarters empty. It was clear now. To fortify himself, Hurley had taken a drink before trying for Hatfield. When he had raised the glass bottle it had caught the sun. When he had lowered it after drinking, it had once more given warning. A slight warning, but enough for Hatfield.

"Now how did I ever hit him squarely through the slit?" he asked himself.

He turned Hurley over. The bullet which had killed the deputy had entered the left temple and punctured his brain. Blood was still oozing out.

"He's a right-hander. He'd have had his right eye to that slit, I reckon," he figured.

As his investigating eyes swung the circle, they again rested on the open, cobwebbed window of the warehouse, not more than fifty feet from the spot.

"What's all this? What's wrong, Hays?" a harsh voice cried behind him.

He pivoted. It was Conroy, flanked by a number of Whiteville men. There was a frown on the lawyer's face as he strolled over and stared down at the dead deputy.

"You've killed Deputy Hurley," he said. "This is a horrible mistake, Hays. How did it happen?"

Citizens glowered at Hatfield.

"There's his gun, gents," the Ranger said calmly. "I was standin' in front of Conroy's, at his request, when Hurley opened up on me. I'm sorry to say, though, I didn't shoot him. Somebody else got him."

The men looked doubtful. Old Sheriff Williams appeared, breathing hard, distressed to find his assistant gone.

"Jim; what happened?" he cried. "Did yuh shoot Dave?"

Hatfield shook his head. Another man closely followed Williams up the steps but stopped at the rear, and watched. It was Hank Vernon.

"This is terrible, Hays," said Conroy, clucking his lips in distress. "Hurley was a good friend of ours, a fine young man. I can't see any reason why he would want to shoot you. Maybe you made a mistake. Perhaps Hurley aimed and fired on someone up that side alley and you believed he was shooting at you."

"In that case it was a powerful wide miss," said the Ranger dryly. "His slug hit right where I was standin', eight feet from the alley. However that may be, I didn't hit Hurley. I did hit his gun, but my bullets wouldn't have come through them slits at such an angle. Even if they had, he'd have taken 'em on the other side of the head. Someone got Hurley from that warehouse window, gents. I reckon we'll step over there and see if he left anything behind to give us a clue."

HANK VERNON hurriedly descend the stairs, and was up the back street as the crowd followed Williams, Conroy and Hatfield into the rear of the warehouse. On the second floor they found the open window. Hatfield indicated to the sheriff the freshly disturbed cobwebs and dust. There was a faint scratch in the wood, and the Ranger remarked that the killer had rested his gun on the sill to steady it for his shot.

Hatfield was puzzled. Who had nailed Hurley? The deputy was Conroy's tool. Vernon was leaning against a stable wall, up the alley, when they descended. The young rancher kept silent, watching what went on. A slight shock of suspicion crossed Hatfield's mind.

"I hope Bancroft and Vernon haven't gone in for this sorta work," he thought.

Conroy was frowning, and his left eye twitched as he drew Hatfield aside. "Look here, Jim. I'm sorry about this. Maybe you didn't kill Hurley but you went off half-cocked, and—"

"I reckon I resign," broke in the Ranger lazily. "The job of bein' close to yuh ain't invitin', Conroy. Besides, with Hurley gone, Wililams may take me on as a deputy."

They weighed one another for a time.

"How much does he savvy?" wondered Hatfield. "He knows I'm suspicious. There's no sense in my actin' as if I don't understand anything; him puttin' me on the spot thataway for Hurley. Figgers he's too quick for me, and that I can't catch him. Or is he leadin' me on? He may try again for me."

The lawyer made a tricky opponent, a mental foe, who must be bagged by brain work. It was far different from the gun-versus-gun conflict of officer and outlaw which the Rangers usually were up against.

Just for an instant a reddish glow came into Conroy's eyes.

"Very well Hays," he said quietly. "You were after Hurley's job; it makes things clearer." He turned on his small, finely booted feet, with a shrug of his fat, broad shoulders.

Then he swung back, reached in a pocket and extracted a silver dollar. "Here's your pay for the time you worked."

"S'pose yuh frame it?" the Ranger told him.

Conroy reddened, his jowls flapping. He flung the cartwheel in the dirt at Hatfield's feet.

Hatfield stoped, picked it up, and tossed it high into the air. His Colt whipped out and roared. There was a metallic sound and the silver dollar flipped madly, landing at Conroy's side with a dent in its middle.

Conroy hurried off, back to the plaza. Hank Vernon caught the tall Ranger's eyes, held them and then looked away. He began walking slowly along the narrow dirt alley which came in at right angles to the rear street behind the plaza buildings, and once he glanced back at the tall man, who was watching him.

"He wants to speak to me," Hatfield concluded.

As the crowd began melting off, returning to the saloons or their business, he took after the rancher.

CHAPTER VII

Escape from Doom

VERNON was waiting for the Ranger around the next turn. He was leaning against the rear wall of the Drover's Rest, a large saloon flanking the plaza and opposite the Gilt Edge.

"Kin I buy yuh a drink, Jim?" Hank asked quietly.

"All right, Vernon."

Vernon led the way inside, cutting left into a small back room which had a window looking out on the narrow alley. The alley in turn, ran into the street running up close behind the Chinese laundry and the warehouse. They took chairs at a table near at hand. Hatfield removed his Stetson, wiping the perspiration from his bronzed forehead. A reddish line framed his strong jaw, the mark of the chin-strap which held the big hat on his head.

"Mighty warm down in these parts," he remarked.

The rancher nodded as a bartender in a white apron appeared and took their order.

"I dunno," began Hank, "why yuh took that job with Conroy, Jim. Let me tell yuh he's no friend of ours. As

far as we go, he murdered Ban's son in cold blood and got away with it."

Hatfield watched Vernon's strong, earnest face. He had liked the rancher's quiet manner, his frank look from the start.

"Sometimes," he said softly, "a man does what seems wrong, Vernon, but he has a good reason for it."

Vernon nodded. "I figgered thataway. I know a lot about yuh, that is, what yuh done in fightin' the black riders on yore way in. And I savvy yuh're a friend of Williams, who's okay, though he ain't what a sheriff ought to be because he's too old. At the office yuh stopped Hurley from shootin' Ban in the back, and we didn't miss that either. Yeah, I asked around about yuh, and I hope yuh savvy I had to do it."

"That's okay."

"We had to. Things ain't normal in the county. It's hard to ticket friend or foe. We've been attacked again and again, and the night riders burned my ranchhouse down while I was away. They've killed a good many folks and tried for me from the bushes. Yuh see, I was the on'y witness left against Conroy, when they'd finished off Kansas Joe, a cowboy who seen the shootin' and swore Conroy done it without any excuse."

"Why?"

Hatfield wanted the Crow Foot's inner ideas on the matter. It was up to him, coming to an entirely strange place, to pick up loose ends and try to coordinate them into a readable picture.

Hank Vernon shrugged. "Why? It's a little word but we'd give a lot to understand it. Fred had no quarrel with Conroy, nor with Dred Prescott, who's Conroy's friend. Why is Conroy buyin' up so much land in these parts? Yet he is. We're shore of it, though he'll often put a ranch in a friend's name instead of his own. Prescott's got several spreads, deserted by the owners, and bought with Conroy money."

"Like Phillips'?"

"Like Phillips'."

Hatfield thought it over. Conroy money had bought out Phillips. Then the black riders had gone after the unfortunate people and taken it away.

"I s'pose he'll use it for another purchase and then owlhoot it back," he decided to himself.

Aloud he remarked, "On my way in I noticed a single-track railroad runnin' westward from the outskirts of town."

Vernon nodded. "Yeah, we ship cattle on it."

"How long's it been laid?"

"Oh, five years now. It leads to El Paso."

HATFIELD shook his head. The land would have been revaluated long before this. While a railroad spur might increase its worth, it was an old story by this time. Anyway, Conroy wasn't speculating in land, at least not yet. Railroad speculation usually took place before the right-of-way was laid. He decided to investigate for himself. He might, through his experience in mining work, be able to see something in the hills that the cowmen had missed, outcroppings of rock with color to betray the contents.

The waiter brought the drinks and they raised their glasses, nodded and drank. Hatfield wished to hear Vernon's story, and prodded him a bit. Hank described how he had been riding through the hills, hunting cattle after the washout, when he had heard the shots which had killed Fred Bancroft.

"Huh! Yuh say that Conroy was there and Prescott, too. What were they up to?"

"I can't tell yuh that. They'd been down near the river bank, and some of Prescott's men were over there with a couple of big metal scoops hitched to horses."

Hatfield pricked up his ears. "When do yuh reckon on ridin' back to the Crow Foot?"

"We're startin' after supper. Ban has some business in town this afternoon. And it ain't as easy for a rifleman with telescope sights to pick yuh off in the dark."

"But these here black riders are out."

Vernon shrugged. "We've got twenty men along. We'll fight the passel of 'em if they meet us."

"Good. I'd like to see yore spread, and if yuh've got time, I wish yuh'd take me to the spot where Fred Bancroft was shot. Have yuh any idea where these blacked-up outlaws have their hideout?"

"Not exactly. They usually hit south, though, into the Red Hills and toward Mexico."

"What is it yuh want to tell me, Vernon?" Hatfield asked abruptly.

Hank started, then spoke seriously. "I wanted to say I was shore yuh hadn't shot Hurley. He was a friend of Conroy's, not ours. But I was sittin' back here in this room and heard the shots. I went to the window and saw Dred Prescott flash past, flogggin' his horse."

HATFIELD grunted. He recalled the risen dust that had been in the air when he had run through to Tin Can Alley on the drygulcher's trail. Conroy, then must have ordered Hurley killed!

It added another puzzle to the collection already ticketed in the Ranger's keen brain for solution. The only explanation he could think of was that Hurley must have outgrown his usefulness to Conroy and the latter feared the deputy would crack and talk to the law.

"I did have Hurley worried," Hatfield mused. "If he showed yeller to Conroy and Prescott, they'd put him outa the picture pronto."

Aloud he asked, "Have yuh any idea where I'll find Prescott now?"

"He may be over at Conroy's office, or he might be in the Gilt Edge. That's where he and his gang hang out when they're in town."

"Thanks for the information. I reckon I'll ride with yuh tonight. In regard to these black riders, have yuh thought of bandin' the ranchers together against 'em?"

"Yeah, we have. Bancroft's tried. But everybody is worried 'bout his own spread and it's hard to get any cooperation."

They shook hands, and Hatfield went out and crossed the plaza. Conroy was in the Gilt Edge, at the bar drinking. He saw the lawyer through the open batwings as he paused. Prescott wasn't with him.

Hatfield turned and made for the sheriff's office. Williams was napping in his chair, his feet, boots off for comfort, up on his desk. He started awake at Hatfield's touch. He looked uncomfortable as he recognized the visitor.

"Hello, Jim. I've got Hurley laid out in back."

"Yuh'll need a new deputy, Sheriff. S'pose yuh swear me in for the job?"

Williams flushed. He chewed at his flowing white mustache.

"I can't do it, Jim. It'd mean my job. Conroy and some others just left here. They think yuh wanted Hurley outa the way so's yuh could have his place. 'Course I don't believe that, and I'll give yuh all the aid I can, but I've already sworn in a new deputy recommended by the fellers who were here."

Hatfield stared at the shaken oldster. "Another one of Conroy's pards, I s'pose," he thought.

"Okay, Sheriff," he murmured aloud.

He couldn't find any anger against Williams. The man's fighting days were long past, and he was hanging onto his job by a thread.

Sleep was tugging at the tall officer's eyelids. He had had but a brief rest since the last few hours taken on the trail to Whiteville. He swung on his heels and walked diagonally across the plaza toward the livery stable where his pet Goldy waited, out in the back corral. He understood the looks the citizens he passed gave him. Conroy had started rumors against him that had aroused poisonous suspicion. It meant he would have trouble rallying the inhabitants when the moment for that came.

After looking to see if the golden sorrel was all right, he retired to the hayloft and went to sleep.

The booming roll of guns brought him awake and fully alert several hours later. Hoofs rumbled in the

main street and men were yelling. Quickly he buckled on his guns, jumped into his big boots and slid down the ladder. The stablemen were up front, looking from their windows as Hatfield ran through.

"What's up?" he demanded.

"A gang of hombres shootin' up the town," replied a youth in overalls.

It was the moment between daylight and darkness. The Red Hills still glowed with the deep ruby sheen of the dying sun but the purple shadows were long over Whiteville. Lamps and candles had been lit in saloons and restaurants and private homes. Hatfield went out but paused, a hand on the hitch-rail, before exposing himself in the open plaza.

"Conroy's smart enough to think up a draw-out, at that," he decided.

Dust rose in the plaza, where a score of riders, spread out, and flogging a mad ring, Indian fashion, shrilled rebel yells and fired Colts into the air or at blank windows and walls. A fighting man's urge was to dash out and try to check the crazy sport. Sheriff Williams was on the other side, shouting himself hoarse and threatening them with a double-barreled shotgun.

As the Ranger ducked under the rail, a rifle spanged right overhead. Shouts came from across the plaza. The Drover's Rest lay that way. Through the drifting dust, he saw Hank Vernon dash down off the saloon porch and run into the street, followed by a dozen Crow Foot waddies.

"It *is* a draw-out!" Hatsfield muttered, drawing his Colt.

Vernon and his men had stopped, bending over a prostrate figure in the dirt, a man struck down by a bullet.

Instead of rushing over to them, Hatfield jumped out into the gutter. Gazing upward so he could command a view of the windows above the roof of the awnings, he caught the sheen of a long metal barrel. An instant later this flashed a spangle of crimson.

HATFIELD threw up his Colt, thumbing the hammer.

The rifle went off again, but into the sky and he knew his shot had taken effect. A second one swung from an adjoining window, trying to cover him, but he shifted and flipped bullets that way, shattering the glass.

He kept moving, a piece of strategy which proved its value. For an instant after he had made his shots, a burning, paralyzing sensation dropped his left arm to his side and he knew he had been hit by a slug coming from the opposite side of the street.

"They're after me, too, I reckon," he muttered, and jumped back among the horses at the hitch-rail.

They shouldered him, threatening to tread on his feet. A bullet wounded one. The animal reared wildly, and Hatfield scampered under the railing out of danger from flying hoofs. The shock of the wound was already wearing off, though blood was trickling down his elbow.

Pistols loaded and ready as he moved, Hatfield went to the door below the windows from which the murderous killers had fired. It was a small store, shut for the night. He put his right shoulder to the portal and the padlock hasp ripped from the wood as he shoved. Inside it was dark. Overhead he could hear heavy footfalls going toward the back of the building. He followed them by his sense of hearing, staying on the lower floor.

Men were coming down the stairs. The Ranger could hear them hotly cursing. Opening a side door into a little entry that gave onto Tin Can Alley, he found he was at the bottom of a flight of wooden steps, and waited silently in the darkness.

"Let's drop him and beat it, Bink," a man gasped. "He's heavy as lead. I believe he's gone."

"No he ain't. Dred would kill us for leavin' him, Chuck. He's Conchita's brother, ain't he?"

Their horses were outside in the alley and they would have been outside before this but, guessing what had happened from the snatch of talk he caught, Hatfield reckoned he had wounded one of them and the other two were carrying the victim.

"Ugh! My foot slipped—"

"Keerful," Chuck snarled. "Yuh

near pulled me down with yuh."

A low moan sounded. "Told yuh he wasn't dead," Bink snapped. "We're down—oh, what in blazes—!"

He let go the head and shoulders of the man he was carrying, for he saw the tall figure standing there at the foot of the stairs.

"Hold it, yuh're under arrest," Hatfield said coldly.

"Not me," Chuck howled.

It was hard to see them in the gloom. Crouched by the banister, Hatfield pulled back his hammer spur under his thumb. There was a dull, sliding thud, and he knew the other had dropped his end of the wounded man. The cluck of a cocking Colt, the snick of leather, told him they were going to fight it out, and he fired at the darker shadow of the man in front.

Bink uttered a howl of pain and crashed the remaining step, sprawling in the entry. Chuck's Colt flamed, the banging reports echoing loudly in the confined space. The bullet breathed against the Ranger's taut-muscled cheek. Blinded by the flare, he let go twice more by sheer instinct, his gun muzzle shifting a fraction of an inch after each shot.

A sudden silence descended upon the small entry. Then a man began to groan. Cautiously Hatfield felt for them. Three were there, all of them lying still. One was quivering and retching. The other two, though warm, never moved. He struck a match, shaded the flame in his palm, and checked them over. They were tough looking, deeply bronzed and heavily armed. They had rifles strapped on their backs as well as pistols and bowie knives thrust in their belts.

They were the sort that traveled with Dred Prescott. In fact, in the brief look he took to make sure both were dead, Hatfield thought he recognized one as a man he had seen at the jail with Conroy.

The last was a slender, brown-skinned Mexican youth, hardly more than twenty. He had a narrow head and blue-black hair that curved around his downy cheeks in long sideburns, and big brown eyes wide open in anguish. His lips quivered, and the top of his skull was open, where a bullet had torn at the brain-pan.

"Reckon I hit yuh while yuh was doin't yore drygulchin' up in that window, sonny," the Ranger said softly, as he knelt by the Mexican, feeling his weak pulse. "Can yuh talk? Conroy and Prescott are yore bosses, ain't they?"

But the Mexican was in no condition to speak. He quivered, then relaxed under the Ranger's hand.

Hatfield rose, went out the back way. The horses which were waiting for their murderous masters sniffed at him as he passed and strode through a passage to the main street. The gang of supposedly rollicking cowboys had whirled out of town, and only the dust haze over the plaza showed where they had been.

A huge crowd milled around the Drover's Rest. Hatfield's grey-green eyes rested there a moment before flicking to the Gilt Edge where he saw Mike Conroy standing on the porch, staring across the plaza at the Drover's.

"I'll get you, sooner or later," Hatfield muttered.

The game was clearer to him. The noisy riders had acted as a trick to place Conroy's enemies out in the open where the hidden marksmen could pick them off under cover of the din.

CHAPTER VIII

At Bay

COLD sweat beaded Hank Vernon's brow and his cheeks were grim and bleak with sorrow.

"Pick him up easy, boys," he murmured. "He's badly hit."

Ban Bancroft, Vernon's friend and former chief, the father of his sweetheart, had run out into the road to see the excitement, and Vernon, trailing him from the saloon, had seen Bancroft go down, blood spurting from a wound in his right side.

Oblivious to flying bullets, Vernon had dashed out and knelt beside Bancroft, who was unconscious. A slug punctured Hank's hat. Another tore his shirt; the accurate fire had abruptly ceased, due to Hatfield's intervention. There were marksmen hidden up above on the same side as the Drover's Rest but a dozen Crow Foot men raged from the Drover's Rest to form a ring around their boss, pistols cocked and ready. A few shots at the wild riders on the plaza sent the latter scooting off into the gathering night.

"Vern—what is it? Oh. Dad—Dad!"

It was no help to Vernon to have Ellen Bancroft come hurrying from the house where she had been visiting for the time her father and his men were in Whiteville. She flung herself down, kissing Bancroft's lips.

Vernon took her gently by the arms, lifted her up. She was slim and her hair was the color of yellow straw with the sun on it. Usually her brown eyes were merry, since her disposition was naturally light-hearted. Since the murder of her brother she had been Ban's mainstay, never far from him. He had been afraid to leave her at the Crow Foot when he went to town for the trial of Conroy and had brought her along, leaving her at a relative's home.

Tears were rolling down her cheeks now and she bit her lower lip in a frenzy of grief.

"He'll pull through," Vernon muttered. "Yuh git on back and take it easy."

But of course she wouldn't. The Crow Foot men picked up their chief and carried him as gently as possible to the Drover's Rest where they placed him on a couch in the rear of the building. Ellen took a chair by his head. He began to mutter and swear, the blood gushing out at an alarming rate.

Men went for the town doctor. As they waited, the tall man, known to Vernon as Jim Hays and with whom Hank had already formed a strong bond of friendship, came in, approaching the couch where Ban lay.

"How is he?" Hatfield demanded.

"Dunno yet," whispered Vernon so Ellen wouldn't hear. "Looks bad."

THE tall man stepped over.

"Artery's cut. It has to be nipped till the sawbones comes," he said. His slim hands were gentle and skillful, and the bleeding checked under their ministrations, as he gave first-aid to the wounded rancher. "This the only wound?"

"Yeah, that's all."

"He ought to pull through, then. He's got a tear there but the bullet busted a couple of ribs and glanced off."

Ellen turned her tear-stained, pretty face to him.

"Oh, I'm so glad to hear you say that. I—I couldn't bear to—" She stopped, as the doctor hurried in, black bag in hand.

The doctor soon assured them that Ban Bancroft would get well. "He's better off than the sheriff. I couldn't do anything for him," the physician remarked, as he set about dressing the wound and tying off the severed artery.

"What!" cried Vernon. "Is Williams hit?"

"A stray one went through his head, killed him instantly."

Relieved as he was by the news that Bancroft would live, Hank Vernon was terribly shocked at Williams' death. But he did not go out immediately, for he had to see to his friend and Ellen.

When the doctor finished, he ordered, "Keep him quiet for twenty-four hours, till the shock wears off. Then he can go home flat, in a wagon, if you're careful. Ellen, you stay here and watch him."

Stationing Crow Foot waddies about the room in which Bancroft lay, Hank Vernon went through the big bar, and paused for a bracer. As he was drinking it, Hatfield came through the batwings and slid up to his side.

"They got the sheriff, shore enuff," he reported grimly.

"Blast them." Vernon wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. "They come close to makin' a clean sweep this evenin'."

"Who's Conchita? A friend of Dred Prescott's?"

"Reckon you mean Conchita Gonzales, Dred's sweetheart. They say she's the daughter of a Mexican bandit chief, Pablo Gonzales, who operates across the border."

"I've heard of Gonzales. Is this Conchita in town?"

"Yeah. She sings and dances at the Gilt Edge."

"S'pose we stroll over and yuh point her out to me."

"Okay."

They went out, skirting the plaza. Full darkness was on the town, the stars paled by the bright lights of saloons and dancehalls.

"See that abode house back there?" said Vernon, pointing down one of the streets that bisected the main way. "That's Conchita's. It's dark so I guess she's workin'."

They headed toward the Gilt Edge. "How long yuh figger folks 'll let this go on, Vernon?" asked Hatfield.

"What do yuh mean?"

"This murder and pillage in the district. They've tried for me twice in less'n twelve hours. Bancroft is hurt, other ranchers dead. They put the sheriff outa the way. That whoopin' and wild shootin' was to draw us out where hidden marksmen could pick us off while the noise drowned out their shots. I'll tell yuh this but keep it under yore hat. I caught Conchita's young brother with a slug in the head, and two pards of his carried him down the back stairs of that little grocery store over there. The three of 'em are lyin' in there now. I haven't reported it to anybody. I think it was the Mex who hit Ban. Prescott is their boss, and Prescott does what Conroy says."

VERNON growled an oath and his face went hard.

"I'll put a slug through Conroy one of these days."

"There'll be more to it than that, Vernon. There's the black riders and Prescott that'll have to be smashed, too. Conroy's slippery as an eel; there's nuthin' against him that yuh can lay hands on. I don't savvy why he shot Fred Bancroft the way he did, out in the open. He leaves that sorta work to Prescott and the gang as a rule. I don't doubt he planned all this entertainment today. No one will be safe in these parts until the people band together and destroy the night riders, and expose Conroy."

"Yuh're right. This is the last straw."

They stepped up on the porch of the Gilt Edge. It was filled with men. A violin and piano were making music in the dancehall annex reached from the main saloon by open double doors. The odor of whiskey, wet sawdust, hot oil, meat and other foods, mingled together to confound the nostrils.

"There she is now, dancin'," Vernon said, touching Hatfield's arm.

The two young men walked to the wide door and stood looking in at the graceful, slender young woman who occupied the floor. Men and hostesses sat around, watching the act.

Conchita Gonzales was small and exquisitely formed, with raven-black, curly bobbed hair and long, slanting black eyes that shone like stars and had upturning, silky lashes. Her face smiled impishly, and her beautiful, stunning figure, in a short-skirted red dress adorned with silver discs which scintillated in the lamplight, held the eyes of all the men.

She was singing a Mexican dancehall favorite in a heavily accented voice. When she saw Hatfield in the doorway her small white teeth flashed in a quick, bold smile. She rolled her eyes at the Ranger, for the rugged Texan giant drew the attention of women.

Finishing the song she began to dance, and her genius was now apparent. Every curve and line was graceful, and her small silver slippers twinkled and the spangled dress rustled with her lithe movements.

Fascinated by the dancer, Vernon and his friend were jogged back to earth as someone rushed between them. It was a Mexican man, and he screamed in Spanish.

"Conchita! Rafael—*el pobrecito está muerto!*"

Conchita Gonzales checked her

dance. She began yelling at the top of her high-pitched voice, the tears flowing from her dark eyes. Her lips were wide and she put her hands to her powdered cheeks.

"*Muerto—el pobrecito!* No—no—"

"Rafael is dead!" And Rafael was Conchita's brother, the poor little one, who was, Hatfield knew, the dry-gulcher who had wounded Bancroft.

Conchita dashed off the floor, out a door, followed by the Mexican and a number of customers. Vernon and Hatfield trailed after them to the store, where a crowd had begun to gather. Lights were on inside. Michael Conroy stood at the rear of the place, near a large young man in range clothing, leather pants, high black boots, vest and blue shirt, Stetson and bandanna. A deputy's star was pinned to the flap of the vest. He had a long jaw, accentuated by the taut chinstrap of the Stetson.

The three dead ones had been dragged in from the hallway, and lay there in a row. Conchita Gonzales, screaming, tore through to fling herself on her brother's body. In her tigerish grief she filled the place with her cries.

Conroy saw Hatfield enter with Vernon. He nudged the deputy sheriff, whispered to him.

"That's Joe Green, a friend of Conroy's," Vernon said quickly to Hatfield. "He's purty tough."

THE store lamps flickered. Hatfield waited as the deputy came over to him and paused a few feet away, a thumb hooked in his belt. Green was smooth-shaven, and much trimmer than Hurley. His clothing was a trifle too small for his great frame, and fitted very tightly. He had a long underjaw and his skin did not take tan much. The taut chinstrap accentuated his bulldog look with his ears flat against his brown-haired, close-clipped head.

"Say," he growled, his cold, light-blue eyes never shifting off the Ranger, "I want to talk to yuh, stranger. Yuh shot these hombres, didn't yuh?"

"Who me?" asked the Ranger in surprise. "Who says so?"

Deputy Green's right hand patted the star on his breast. "Sheriff Williams bein' dead and me his chief deputy, I'm in charge of the law here till a new sheriff's elected. Yuh was seen to run in here and next thing, these bodies were found. Unbuckle that gunbelt and let her drop. I'm goin' to lock you up—for murder."

A look that was close to amusement shone in the Ranger's grey-green eyes. His slim hands hung easily at his side where the heavy Colts rested in their oiled supple holsters.

"Take my advice, Green, and don't try it," he said softly. "I don't feel like bein' locked up tonight."

Red River Conroy, backing up his henchman, whom he had forced upon Williams before the latter's demise, cried shrilly, "He's an outlaw! He won't obey the sheriff! He ought to be strung up, the dirty—"

"Dry up, Conroy," Hatfield snapped.

Murmurs of anger rose from the crowd which saw only the beautiful young Mexican girl sobbing over the dead body of her brother. Already suspected of shooting Deputy Hurley, the Ranger was in a ticklish position, thanks to Conroy.

In a flash he realized he had been kept so busy warding off the underhanded, vicious blows of his arch-enemy that he had not been aware that Conroy was carefully scheming to turn the town's law against him. Looking at Green, Hatfield decided he could not afford to let the deputy take his guns and lock him up. Even if he were just held in a cell he would lose valuable time. Dred Prescott's long absence was a warning to him. Furthermore the Ranger believed that Conroy might have him killed if he were disarmed and unable to defend himself.

His momentary hesitation, during which he hunted a non-violent way out of this sudden embarrassment, was misconstrued by Deputy Joe Green.

Green's booted feet spread, his shoulders slumped in a gun-fighter's crouch. Hatfield knew he was going to draw. However, the acting sheriff was muscle-bound in comparison to the lithe Ranger. Yet Hatfield did

not desire to force gunplay if he could avoid it. Accordingly his right fist drove with blinding speed to Green's bulldog jaw. The impact of knuckles on bone cracked like a shot. Green's head snapped back and he collapsed soggily to the floor while a gasp circulated through the crowd at the terrific power of the cool-eyed man known as Hays.

A metallic click sounded behind Hatfield. Someone had drawn a pistol, cocked it. Green, coming up on his elbow, was rubbing his jaw, blinking dazedly. The Ranger turned to cover his rear. Green, recovering enough to go for his gun, started a draw, but Hatfield's pistol flashed out and up as he pivoted again. Curses came from those around his flanks.

Conroy, safe behind several other citizens, cried, "Stop him—don't let him flout the law!"

CHAPTER IX

The Red Hills

A CRISP, stern voice knifed through the store from the street door.

"Hold them guns, gents! I'm here!"

It was Hank Vernon, his hands full of Colts, covering his tall friend's retreat. Some of Conroy's men had entered quietly with drawn guns to try for the Ranger, and there were always riff-raff around who would dive into a fuss without reason or invitation.

The quickness of Hatfield had checked them, and now Vernon's interference held them for the moments needed to reach the exit. Jim Hatfield wished to avoid gunplay in the crowded store, and he backed out, Vernon jumping with him. They swung left and ran along the sidewalk, while back in the store an angry, buzzing sound began.

"Stop them!" bellowed Mike Conroy.

Racing beside Vernon, Hatfield said, "We'll head for the livery stable and git outa town for the time bein'."

A couple of Conroy's friends appeared on the walk outside the store and, throwing up revolvers, banged away at the running pair. Bullets shrieked about their heads as Hatfield ducked out of sight into an alley with Vernon at his heels.

They reached the livery stable's rear door. Hatfield took his hull and cinched up the golden sorrel, who was rested and ready to go. Blueboy, Vernon's swift stallion was in the same corral, and Hank was saddled up when the Ranger was. Their rapid flight had given them a brief respite, and by the time one of Conroy's scouts came up to the stable and saw them, letting out a whoop to the gathering mob in the plaza, the two young men hit leather and spurted off into the night.

"Thanks for the hand, Hank," grunted the Ranger, as they put space between themselves and Whiteville.

"It was a pleasure," replied Vernon. "What do we do next?"

Hatfield shook his head, and rode in silence for a time, turning it all over in his keen mind.

"Mebbe," he drawled at last, "I'll kick myself first, Vernon, for lettin' Conroy keep me so long in town. Where's Prescott? What's he up to all this time? I've been so busy scrappin' with the killers Conroy sent in after us, I ain't looked over the lay of the land. Do you reckon yuh could show me around some?"

"Glad to."

"I savy yuh're worried about Bancroft, but yuh can't very well go back to town now, anyways. Conroy and Green'll be watchin' for yuh."

"That's right. The men 'll keep close watch on the boss, anyhow, til he kin be moved home. Yuh want to see the Sierra Roya and the ranches? Is that it?"

"Yeah. I've got to figger what Conroy's after, and I've got to smell out the hidin' place of the black riders."

BEHIND them, Whiteville was a glow in the sky. They circled the town at a safe distance, and Hank Vernon showed the way, hitting a dirt road that led westward into rising country.

"I kin send back a messenger from the Double E," Vernon said.

They buckled down to riding, the two powerful horses vying with each other for the pace. A slice of moon showed over the mountains before them and the stars were thick as spattered milk spots in the soft sky. A warm wind from the Mexican desert country to the southwest blew in their faces.

The trail rose rapidly toward the Red Hills. It was good cattle country, with the Diablo River watering it. Coarse, nutritious grasses fought the mesquite and thorned brush, standing against the sky like soldiers in broken formation.

After an hour of this, with the dust rolling behind them, Hank Vernon asked suddenly, "Say, just who are yuh, Jim? Do yuh mind tellin' me? Yuh're so set on runnin' Conroy and Prescott down. After all, it ain't yore business—or is it?"

"It is," Hatfield replied. "I'm from Austin, Ranger Headquarters. Cap'n Bill McDowell sent me to run these killers down. My real name is Jim Hatfield. Keep it to yoreself, though, Vernon. I'd rather check farther 'fore I step into the open."

Hank Vernon whistled. "Jim Hatfield! Why, we've heard tell of yuh down here! I'm shore glad yuh've come, Jim."

"This Conroy's a slippery number," Hatfield went on, thinking aloud. "He savvies who I am. Hurley was one of his paid agents. Conroy's gotten away with murder and worse. He must know I'm down here to take him and his gang. No doubt Hurley spilled the beans after he overheard my conversation with Williams. Conroy's made me out to be an outlaw, though he savvies who I really am. He's laughin' at me up his sleeve all the time, and he's kept me busy since I hit town."

"I'm glad yuh were around," Vernon said earnestly. "Yuh saved Ban and me from them sharpshooters."

He took the lead, swinging off the main road onto a dirt lane. After a mile he slowed Blueboy.

"Let me ride ahead Jim," he said. "This is the Double E, and they'll have guards out."

Vernon cantered a hundred yards in front, and began whistling and singing out. After a time, replies came, and the two went in slowly, seeing the darkened buildings ahead. Armed cowboys stepped out on the trail, hailing them.

"It's Hank Vernon—howdy, Rusty. Don't want to disturb yuh, but it's important."

"Who's that with yuh?"

"Good friend, Jim Hays. Kin we have some water? And I wish yuh'd send a message back to the Drover's Rest for me in the mornin! Tell Bancroft and Ellen that I'm okay and will meet 'em at the ranch."

"Okay," Rusty, the Double E foreman promised.

ED EWERTS, owner of the spread, roused from sleep and came out to greet them. He insisted that the two come in and have a bite and a drink. In the kitchen, Ewerts, his brown hair tousled, pants and shirt pulled on and feet bare, turned his blue eyes on the tall Hatfield, weighing the newcomer to the range.

"We've had a lot of trouble in these parts," explained Ewerts. "Say Hank, a feller offered me a price for my property but I ain't sellin', I told him."

"Huh. Who was it?"

"An hombre named Joe Green from Whiteville."

"Conroy's friend," mused Hatfield, "our new sheriff."

Ewerts was married, and had three small children. The family slept peacefully in the roomy house. The spread hired fifteen range riders.

"What yuh need, Ewerts, and all the folks in these parts," advised the Ranger, "is to band together and wipe out them black riders who're botherin' yuh. Put every man yuh kin in the saddle and go after 'em."

"Yeah, but the trouble with that is I wouldn't want to leave my wife and kids here unguarded while we was huntin' 'em."

"Here's the way to do it," Hatfield said smoothly. "Yuh collect yore womenfolk and kids and take 'em to

one point, say a big spread like the Crow Foot. Leave a strong guard on 'em and that will release plenty of fightin' men for the cleanup."

"That does make sense," agreed Ewerts. "I might do that if we can find the hideout of them black riders."

"Yuh'll hear from us soon, then," Hatfield promised.

After refreshment and a short rest, the two rode on for the Crow Foot. The land grew wilder, with spurs of the Red Hills looming on either side. Now and then they skirted the Diablo River, the stream's canyon offering the easiest way through a mountain. At break of the grey, misty dawn, they passed a small ranch that seemed entirely deserted. Vernon pointed to it.

"That's where the Phillips lived. It's Conroy's now."

When they paused at the B in a Box, owned by Will Brown, the sun was ruby-red behind them. Brown, a huge, hearty Texan, greeted them jovially and invited them in.

These folks were the backbone of the Lone Star State, Hatfield knew, pioneers who had made the country strong and self-reliant. Each was an individualist, however, believing he could take care of himself and his own, and that meant it was sometimes hard to band them together even in a common cause. If a man wasn't attacked himself, he would not feel justified in dropping everything and going after the enemy. Hatfield broached his idea of placing the women and children at the Crow Foot under strong guard, while those who could, would ride on the trail of the bandits. He meant to weld them into a compact fighting force, once he had located Dred Prescott's gang.

CHAPTER X

Not Welcome

NEARLY three hours later, after passing a couple of other homesteads and speaking briefly with the owners, they pulled up in the corral yard of the great Crow Foot, the largest spread Hatfield had seen across the Pecos. The house was very large and freshly whitewashed. A big kitchen leanto was tacked on at the rear, while bedroom wings projected from the flanks and a roofed veranda of Spanish design ran around three sides. There were stables and barns, a blacksmith shop, a long bunkhouse, and hay shelters and cribs. Hundreds of mustangs with the fingered brand ran in a huge pasture corral, while blooded cattle were in another enclosure, creatures used for breeding improvement. The river ran behind the house, in the flats reached through two gaps in the surrounding hills.

Though Ban Bancroft and a number of his fighting men were in Whiteville, there were still enough on hand to guard the ranch. They hailed Hank Vernon as he dismounted, stiff from the all-night ride. Hatfield nodded to the boys, and they went in after seeing to their mounts, cleaned up, had some dinner and then lay down for a nap.

Around four o'clock, they saddled up and rode across the hilly region, keeping near the Diablo River. Vernon, according to Hatfield's wishes, led him toward the spot where Fred Bancroft had been killed.

Some miles out from the Crow Foot buildings, Hatfield rode Goldy across a flat area, Blueboy and Vernon some yards off to the right. Suddenly the Ranger gave a quick exclamation, pulling his reins to swing the sorrel. At the same time he freed his high-heeled boot from a tapped stirrup, hitting the ground running. Goldy, crossing the apparently smooth flat, had sunk a forehoof into a hole, and, worried over his pet, the Ranger had tried to get his weight off as the handsome gelding nearly went down.

Vernon pulled Blueboy around, and watched the dismounted Hatfield with anxiety in his eyes—Hank knew how a man felt about his best horse. Hatfield lifted Goldy's hoof gently, examined it, feeling it carefully. Then he took the reins and led the sorrel around for a time, watching him.

Finally he heaved a deep sigh of relief.

"He's okay," he grunted.

Hatfield was about to mount again but the hole into which Goldy had slipped attracted his eye.

"Say, that's mighty big for a gopher," he observed, and bent over it. "Yuh wouldn't figger on a large animal burrow out here on the flat."

Vernon shrugged. There were always holes around and sometimes a horse would break a leg or pull a tendon no matter what the rider's skill.

"It's a foot wide," went on the Ranger. "Very reg'lar, too. The dirt's loose, as if it'd been filled in—say, has there ever been a telegraph line through here? This is about the size of a post hole."

"Nope. Never noticed sech a thing before," replied Vernon. "Now, over that next ridge is where Fred was killed, Jim."

THEY pushed on, and topped the rise.

"I came in from the right there, while Fred and Kansas Joe rode over this here ridge as we're goin' now," said Vernon, gesturing toward the flatlands along the river.

To the right, as they descended the steep trail, crimson bluffs showed, cut through by the stream.

"What were yuh all doin' out here that day?" asked the Ranger, taking in the scene.

"There had been a cloudburst in the mountains," replied Vernon, "and I was huntin' lost cattle as were the others. The river went loco, washed over its banks and flooded the range for miles around. Kansas Joe and Fred, and a bunch of other riders, were out. Fred was ahead of Joe, who had stopped to pull a cow out of a mudhole."

Hatfield had his eyes on the ground as they moved, and guided the sorrel off to the right, nearly bumping Blueboy.

"There's another of them filled-in postholes," he remarked.

"Fred was shot over there near the river. When I rode up past the bluffs, Conroy, Prescott and a bunch of their men rode toward Kansas Joe and me, carryin' the body."

They rode on to the river bank and turned along it. The earth still showed the beaten effect of the washout, where the river had run, washing out brush and grass and depositing red sand.

Hatfield kept his eyes peeled but saw nothing that indicated valuable minerals, such as quartz outcroppings or colors in the rocks. The stream bed did not look like gold-bearing stuff.

"Where'd Conroy have them scoops yuh noted?" he asked.

"Right along in here."

Hatfield shook his head, unable to get a clue as yet. "How'd they fetch 'em out here, anyways? Is this Crow Foot land?"

"Yeah, it is. The river's our east boundary. Conroy owns a small spread a few miles away. I reckon they came out from there. He runs a few cows but uses it mainly for spreein' and huntin'."

"Yuh s'pose Dred Prescott might be hidin' at Conroy's ranch?"

"He might be. Yuh'll hafta go in keerful-like, though. Conroy keeps several men there and they ain't friendly to us."

"We'll take a peek, anyways." To himself Hatfield thought, "Conroy's too clever to let the black riders use his spread as a meetin' place; but I might pick up somethin'."

They forded the river, rode across rough land for a couple of miles, then climbed a slope. At the top, Vernon pointed down at a group of small buildings with a few scrawny spruce trees set about them.

"That's Conroy's ranch."

They could see a thin spiral of blue smoke rising from the chimney of a rough, raw-board shack, with a couple of sheds out back. Behind them the Sierra Roya, catching the sinking sun, was living up to its famous crimson name.

Riding on down the slope, they pushed through high weeds that grew in the yard. Several men lounged in the shade, and the odor of frying meat and potatoes came to them. The men were dirty, ill-kempt fellows, and all

wore six-shooters which looked ready for action. They scowled at Vernon and his tall friend, and did not seem pleased to see them.

One window gave out on the side where Hatfield and Vernon sat their horses, facing the four on the bench. Hatfield did not let it entirely out of his range of vision. He could watch it while he confronted the quartet of bewhiskered, slovenly cowboys.

"Could we water our horses?" he asked politely.

At the side of one of the sheds, the Ranger had noted two large metal scoops of the sort used in moving earth to make cellar or other excavations. They had rusted in the sun, and dried red dirt stuck to them like cement.

A burly, black-bearded men, with close-set dark eyes, acted as spokesman for the four.

"The river's close enuff, ain't it?" he growled. "Yuh just came through it. Yore horses' hocks are still damp."

"That's true," agreed Hatfield. "But I got a cinch that's near busted. Lend me a needle and thread."

"This ain't no sewin' circle. Say, Vernon, yuh savvy yuh ain't welcome here."

"Marty," Hank replied coldly, "I allus said yuh were a hawg. Yuh look like one and yuh act like one."

Hatfield dismounted, d r o p p i n g Goldy's reins. Marty stiffened, licked his sun-cracked lips. He stood up, slowly, hairy hands at his sides.

"Blast yore filthy hide," he fumed. "Git, 'fore I—"

The Ranger never turned a hair as he let Marty spread his feet, crouch and start for his smooth-handled Colt .45. He had seen the quick look the leader gave his men. They all jumped up as Marty sought to shoot. No doubt they had orders to kill Vernon. They did not know the tall man yet but if he was their enemy—

"Look out, Jim," bawled Hank, going for his pistol as he saw Marty meant to shoot.

Hatfield's blue-steel weapon jumped into his slim hand. There was no apparent hurry. Yet, there it was, in position, and flaming while Marty's barrel had just c l e a r e d leather.

Marty shivered as hot metal clawed into his vitals. His pistol exploded, the slug kicking up dust a yard in front of Hatfield. The Ranger's grey-green eyes were cool and calculating as they shifted to watch the others. Vernon, gun ready, let go at the bony gunman at the far end of the bench who had made a quick draw as Marty opened the ball.

Marty hit the loose sandy dirt before the bench and crumpled up. As he thudded down, the fellow Vernon had triggered at reeled under the impact of a bullet striking his thigh. He screamed and flipped up his Colt, but Hatfield fired, dropping him for keeps.

The other two renegades froze, motionless, hands resting on gun butts. One licked his lips, staring with horrible fascination at the imperturbable Hatfield. The second began swearing with the shrill of hysteria in his voice.

HATFIELD fired again but not at the quitters. He had never forgotten that window, close at hand. It was open at the bottom and a double-barreled shotgun was hastily thrust out, covering him with its menacing eyes. He could see a man's head, but the light on the glass prevented him from identifying anything but the general outline at which he aimed.

"Whoosh!"

The first barrel of the shotgun discharged. The wadded buckshot swirled through the air between Hatfield and his horse, and the gun fell clattering on the bench. Silence came from within.

"Take a run in and see if there's any more, Hank," ordered the Ranger. "Watch out when yuh step in the door."

Vernon dismounted and entered by the front way, around the corner. In a few moments he sang out to Hatfield from the open window.

"Looks all clear, Jim."

"Who's that inside?"

"Arkansas Muller—he's one of Conroy's waddies here."

Prescott wasn't around, then. Ver-

non came out and while Hatfield held the survivors under the gun, Hank disarmed them. Then, at the Ranger's order, he tied their hands behind them. They got back their nerve as they found they weren't to be killed.

"Yuh'll pay for this!" Jed Cassidy snarled. "Conroy'll see to it."

"Yuh reckon he'll be here to collect soon?" asked Hatfield quietly.

"Yuh'll see."

Leaving Vernon on guard, Hatfield stepped into the shack. It had one big room with a kitchen tacked on the back. Several rough bunks lined the walls and there was a wood-burning fireplace, a table and some chairs. The ceiling was of a thick green cloth, stretched over the rafters, evidently allowing an air space up there. He found nothing to interest him in the house. Going outside, he tried the shed beside which the scoops lay.

A cobwebbed window gave some light in the square enclosure. Old saddles, bridles and an assortment of tools hung inside. He took in the picks and shovels and crowbars, the usual stuff needed for work around a ranch.

To the right, however, in the far corner, his eyes stopped on a couple of metal tools of queer design. They seized his interest. They were large, of heavy steel, and perhaps two feet long, with biting edges at the bottom and a threaded stem at the top. They had been washed clean and had rusted over. Against the wall lay several lengths of steel rod, so that the shaft could be elongated according to desire.

Jim Hatfield had studied mining engineering for a time, before he had joined up with the Rangers, and he recognized the tools.

"Pod augers!" he muttered.

"Well?" asked Hank, as he rejoined his friend. "Did yuh find anything interesting?"

"I savvy now what made that hole Goldy stepped in, Hank," Hatfield told his friend in a low voice.

The two prisoners sat slumped on the bench and merely cursed at the Ranger's questions. In the west the Red Hills glowed with deep color; the sun was down behind them, and night close at hand.

"I've got a hunch, Hank," Hatfield told Veron, "that Prescott'll show here 'fore long, mebbe tonight. These two birds seem waiting for somethin'. Anyways, I figger I'll stay here, for the night at least. Conroy's liable to get excited when he finds I'm out of his sight, and I want to see what he does. They kin git on our trail easy enough."

"Yeah. But how do yuh reckon on stayin' here? S'pose Prescott has a bunch of men with him?"

"I don't aim to let him see me."

"How 'bout Marty and the rest—they'll know right away somethin's sour when they see the bodies."

"We'll fix that. There's picks and shovels in that shed, and we've got two willin' helpers!" Drily Hatfield indicated the two furious gunmen.

An hour later it was dark and the three dead ones were underground, buried in the rank weeds behind the barn. Then Hatfield led Vernon off a few paces so he could speak to him without being overheard by the prisoners.

"Yuh'll soon hear from me, Hank. I figger Conroy'll be on my trail, or send his men after me. They'll be shore to light here. I want yuh to talk to yore friends and neighbors. Tell 'em to be ready to fetch their women and children to Bancroft's, and be set for the big fight, savvy?"

"I savvy. We're with yuh, Jim."

"Hold them two under guard at the Crow Foot."

Vernon mounted Blueboy. The two captives were fastened to their saddles on horses and roped in the corral. The Ranger watched Vernon disappear westward in the starry night, the pair of gunnies riding ahead.

CHAPTER XI

The Ranger Acts

INSIDE the house, Hatfield set the place in order, eradicating all signs of the fight. By a shaded candle

he made ready for his vigil. He found a piece of paper and a pencil stub in the kitchen and in a scrawled hand wrote:

Run out of likker. Gone to get sum.
—Marty.

He took all the whiskey bottles out of the cupboard and hid them in the barn loft, and he left the note on the table in the main room. Standing on a chair, he discovered that the thick green ceiling material was loosely fastened at its edges by bent nails that acted as hooks. Turning a couple, he worked the cloth off and made a hole to crawl through. He brought in a couple of wide boards which he laid on the rafters above the green stuff, fixing a rest up there for himself. He found he could reach through and re-hook the cloth, closing the gap, from his perch. He set a jug of water up there, and spare gunbelts. Next he went out and spoke to the golden sorrel. He started Goldy away with a gentle slap, and the gelding knew he was to stay out of the way until his master should whistle him up.

Then, with everything as much in order as he could put it, he sat out on the bench and waited.

Two hours later the wind brought him the sound of hoofbeats. He scurried inside, went up on his board perch, and closed the green material by hooking it on the tack heads. A rider came into the yard, dismounted.

"Hey, Marty—Scooter—where is everybody?"

Stumbling over a chair, the fellow entered the cabin, and struck a match. He touched it to a blackened candlewick and a little yellow flame came up. Through a tiny crack Hatfield recognized Dred Prescott, the stocky killer. Prescott looked about, sniffing and muttering to himself. They he saw the note and read it.

"Likker! The fools got dry and couldn't make a saloon quick enuff," he grunted aloud.

Suddenly he tensed, listening. He blew out the candle and went outside. Hatfield, too, caught the heavy beating of many hoofs approaching the little spread. Pleased with the game which had already arrived under his observation post, the Ranger waited with infinite patience. It was not long before thirty or forty men, judging by the sound of voices and the stamp of hoofs, arrived in the yard.

Marty was paged again. But when he failed to respond, several men entered and lighted up. Their leader was Joe Green, the self-appointed sheriff, and he had a posse with him, all friends of Conroy's and his own.

"What are yuh doin' here?" demanded Dred.

"We're on that big jigger's trail, Dred. He shot up the town and saved Bancroft and Vernon—"

"Git yore men outside while we palaver," ordered Prescott.

GREEN waved his lieutenants outside. He sat down with Prescott and they talked in low voices but Hatfield could hear everything they said.

"That Ranger salivated Rafael, Conchita's brother," Green informed Prescott. "The Boss sent me after him to put him away for keeps. I've done what Conroy ordered and sent word to all ranchers that the big jigger's a killer, wanted for murder. It ought to queer his game if he shows up anywhere."

"Okay," growled Prescott. "I seen Gonzales and it's all settled. In forty hours we'll have this range wiped clean as a whistle. The old goat wanted a big cut, but I talked him over. Is Conroy comin' out this way?"

"He said he was. He's real worried over that Ranger."

"I'll wanta see him. But this ain't a good place for us to show, not in the daytime, anyways. That fool Marty went off with his men to swill likker, just when they should be on guard."

Green and his band did not remain long at the ranch, but mounted and rode away. Prescott lay down in a bunk and closed his eyes. An hour later, he roused and listened.

He got up and flitted into the darkened kitchen, waiting in the shadows with drawn gun. But it was Conchita Gonzales, escorted by a couple

of Mexicans, who entered. The beautiful girl wore a dark riding suit and had a sombrero pinned over her blue-black tresses. "Oh, hullo, baby," cried Prescott, holding out his arms.

She ran to them, sobbing.

"Rafael ees dead, Pressie," she cried in broken English. "Zat beeg peeg shoot heem!"

"I savvy." Prescott kissed her. "I'll send him to kingdom come with a belly full of lead for that, Conchita," he swore.

"*Si.* And I sen' Alberto to breeng my papa, al-so."

"Yuh did? I just left yore dad this afternoon up in Skeleton Canyon."

"Alberto weel fin' heem. Papa weel keel zat skonk."

Hatfield was pleased with the way his man-trap was developing. Hardly had Conchita been made welcome than more hoofbeats shook the earth, and a great band of riders swirled up outside. A giant form crowded into the little house, shaking it with his weight. Hatfield peeked curiously down at the peaked sombrero, trimmed with gold conchas.

It brushed the green material, which was over seven feet from the rough floor. Below was a fierce face, with swirling black mustaches sticking out like curved handlebars. Dark, flashing eyes and pearly teeth showed in his wind-scoured features and he had a great, smashed nose over sneering lips. A fine velvet vest with rows of pearl buttons was flapping open over the dark silk shirt, tucked into expensive, tight-fitting pants. Holding up the pants was a wide red sash, and the big feet were cased in calfskin boots with huge silver Mexican spurs at the heels.

Cartridge belts crossed the Mexican giant's broad, barrel chest. Hatfield figured he must tip the scales near three hundred pounds. Pearl-handled Colts, of .45-caliber, peeped from the mighty man's holsters.

"*Pa-pa mio!*" screamed Conchita, and flung herself at him.

He caught her up, kissing her.

"Rafael—*el pobrecito está muerto!*" she sobbed.

"*Está muerto!*" bellowed the huge Gonzales at the top of his bull voice. "*Qué lastima!*—how awful."

A MURMUR came from outside, the sound of many men, followers of the terrible bandit chief, Pablo Gonzales.

Tears were flowing down the bandit's face and dripping off his mustache ends. Gonzales and Conchita wailed at the top of their voices until Dred Prescott stepped forward.

"This ain't no place for a wake, Gonzales—" Prescott began, then halted as the noises outside told that someone else was coming.

A short time later Mike Conroy stamped inside. He scowled at the gathering. Fury reddened his jowls. "Fools," he cried, "I could hear you for a mile on the way in. What's the idea?"

"My broth-aire, he ees dead," explained Conchita.

"I know. Everyone knows. We'll get the man who did it, and you can tear him into little pieces if you want to," Conroy replied impatiently. "In the meantime, we've got important business to tend to. Dred, what's all this about? You know how ticklish things are at the moment. Did Joe—" He broke off, frowning. "Gonzales, you made a mistake in coming here this way with your gang. I'm supposed to keep my face clean. Get back at once and stay hidden until Prescott gives the word." With his sharp tongue, Conroy lashed them in criticism of their stupidity.

Gonzales scowled and bristled. Then he shrugged, turned on his great spurs and rattled out, followed by Conchita.

Prescott and Conroy remained in the shack. The lawyer sat down heavily in a chair at the center table, and complained, "This is a heck of a note, Dred! I wonder if Green has caught up with that cursed Ranger yet?"

"Green was here not long ago, Boss. He's trailin' him, leavin' an alarm at all ranches to capture him dead or alive."

Hatfield mentally started. Conroy was actually organizing the decent

people of the community against *him!* Suspicion that would be difficult to stifle was being planted in the cowmen's breast against Texas Ranger Jim Hatfield.

"Gonzales and I made our plans," Prescott continued. "We're all up in Skeleton Canyon, armin' and makin' ready. We need plenty of ammunition for this job. We'll be ready by Thursday night and we'll take the Crow Foot fust, then the others. Can't lose."

Conroy tapped the table top with his finger tips, staring at the board wall.

"I should never have let Hatfield out of my sight," he growled. "Where is he now? Is he at the Crow Foot with Vernon? Vernon'll tell him about my ownin' this ranch here. He may come here and try to spy on us."

"Calm down, Chief. He'll be buzzard bait inside of forty-eight hours. Yuh said yoreself yuh could think faster'n the Rangers."

"Huh. I can, ordinarily. But I saw this fool Hatfield in action several times. I kept him busy for a while, but he must have figured what I was doing. He's not only the fastest man physically that I ever saw but he's smart as well."

Prescott was contemptuous of the Ranger's powers. He patted his sheathed Colt. "I'll show yuh how to make him jump, Mike, next time I come eye to eye with the skunk. I'll shoot him on sight."

But Conroy was in an indigo mood. The muscles of his cheek kept twitching as he nervously drummed the table with his fingers.

"I've got a funny feeling inside, Dred, as if somebody's watching me. It's like superstition. You know it isn't so, yet it worries you. When I was practicing law near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I had the same sensations. I ignored them and was arrested the next day. Only my luck and a legal trick saved me back there. I skipped bail and came west." He shook himself, and blinked. "There's so much at stake here, and a slip would wreck us all. Remember, Dred, foolish notions of mercy would ruin our game."

"I savvy, and so does Gonzales. We'll take the blame and run for it. Yuh handle things here. We come back when it's quiet and divvy up."

Conroy kept beating his rat-a-tat-on the table, scowling. "Tell Marty to fetch me a stiff drink. I need a bracer."

Prescott got up. "I'll git yuh a swig, Boss. Got a flask in my saddle-bag. Marty ain't here."

"Well—where is he?"

"He wasn't around when I pulled in earlier. All the boys were gone."

Conroy left his chair as if it had suddenly turned hot beneath him. "You mean the ranch was deserted when you came, Dred?"

"Yeah, but it's nuthin' to worry over. It's that fool, Marty. He ran out of likker and they all got dry and rode to git some."

Prescott found the note which Hatfield had left and passed it to Conroy, who read it with a glance.

The lawyer's cheek twitched even more violently. He hurried to a rear corner, where he kicked aside a straw mat, disclosing a small trap door fitted into the wooden flooring. This he lifted and reaching down, he drew forth a bottle filled with red whiskey. He pointed in, growling,

"The hole's full-up."

CHAPTER XII

Gun to Gun

RANGER JIM HATFIELD braced himself for action. Conroy's swift intuition, the lawyer's ability to think on his feet and follow a train of clues with lightning speed to a logical conclusion, made him a dangerous opponent.

"Ain't that Marty's writin'?" Prescott asked.

"It might be," replied Conroy impatiently. "I've never seen Marty write. Maybe he can't. That's beside the point. Why should they all ride

off to get liquor when there's a dozen cases here? They could send one or two men."

Prescott pushed back his Stetson to scratch his head.

"Mebbe Marty wanted to go see his girl," he suggested.

"With the whole bunch of 'em taggin' after him?" snarled Conroy. "Shut up and let me think."

He began moving about the room, with a light cat's tread, eyes darting this way and that, searching the floor and walls. He pushed at the window through which Hatfield had killed the shotgun-wielder, one of Marty's followers. The Ranger had made a clean shot of it. His .45 slug had caught the man squarely. However, the shotgun in the dying killer's grip had jerked up a bit as it exploded and the wadded buckshot had slightly grazed the wood of the sash. The Ranger had taken care, as he set things in order, to rub this fresh scratch with dirt so it wouldn't attract attention, but now it did not escape Conroy's eyes. The lawyer took a candle over and investigated closely.

Then he dropped to his knees. Hatfield had washed up the blood which had stained the flooring, doing as good a job as possible, but the wood was rough and filled with cracks. Conroy took a deep breath. He looked around as he straightened up and his twitching-eyed glance passed over the green ceiling material but he appeared to notice nothing out of place.

Conroy shrugged, and said to Prescott, "I'm imagining things, I reckon, Dred. Staying in jail got me shaky. No doubt Marty and the boys'll be back soon. I'm going outside and wash up, then I'm going to turn in."

Dred Prescott nodded. The Ranger did not miss the infinitesimal pause, however, as Prescott replied, "Oh—okay, Conroy. I'll have me a swig and then I'll be ridin'."

If Conroy had a sixth sense, so did Jim Hatfield. The hackles were prickling at the back of his neck. Conroy went over to the front door. The lawyer was whistling a tune, carelessly, as if he had shaken off his worries.

"If he saw that blood stain and the scratch, he saw them nails I turned," mused the Ranger, and picked up his six-shooter.

Conroy went quickly outside, no longer in Hatfield's sight. The latter felt, with Conroy out of view, just the way the attorney did about the Ranger. He preferred to know exactly what Conroy was up to.

"Time to vamoose," he decided.

The slightest movement, even a noisy deep breath, was audible in the room when no one was speaking, for the green ceiling material, while thick, was of burlap weave and did not muffle sounds to any appreciable degree. A board squeaked a trifle as it rubbed the rafter under Hatfield's weight.

DRED PRESCOTT was slouched by the door. Hatfield could see his fierce, red-streaked black eyes move. Purposely he allowed another little squeak to sound, and Prescott's gaze flitted up to the very point where he was. The killer's pose told Hatfield that Conroy, playing this life-or-death game of forfeits where the loser received a bullet punctuating his career, had grown hot in his hunt for his arch-enemy, the Texas Ranger. So hot, that Conroy had guessed where Hatfield must be!

Accrediting, the Ranger with a set of nerves made of icy steel, with a brilliant analytical mind and the courage of a lion, Conroy had found enough signs to tell him his foe was probably hiding up there. No doubt he had noted the bent, disturbed nails which Hatfield had turned back when he was set.

There were plenty of gunmen around the ranch, who would obey Prescott and Conroy. The latter had come in with a bodyguard, and undoubtedly was at this very instant giving them orders to get into position and surround the shack so that Hatfield might be taken.

Hatfield's trap threatened to snap back and catch him.

An instant later, Colt in right hand and the hammer spur back under his thum, Hatfield jumped, into the mid-

dle of a panel of the green material. It gave instantly under him, tearing off its nails.

Prescott shrieked a curse. The Ranger's feet and legs drove through. A second later his whole body plummeting down, landed him on the balls of his feet, in a crouch.

Prescott, despite the fact that he knew, from Conroy's signal given before he left the room to call his fighters, that Hatfield was probably hidden up in the eaves, was startled. The big man's weight shook the floor, rattled everything on the shelves and tables. Dred began his draw, hand flashing to his ready pistol. His shoulders came down in a crouch, legs spread. The moment that Hatfield was flying through the air evened them up for the duel.

NOTHING was said; neither man needed to speak. Prescott knew who his foe was and that it was the officer or himself. He thought he could kill Hatfield and his heavy gun flashed and roared. The explosion doubled itself in the narrow confines of the shack. Hatfield's thumb was off the hammer. He had stayed in his crouch. He felt a startling sensation in the calf of his right leg, knew he was hit. The spasmodic jerk of the nervous system, shocked by the touch of the blunt-nosed bullet, spoiled his second shot.

Hastily he let go a third time at Prescott, but it was unnecessary, just as the second had proved to be. His first had caught Prescott in the forehead, just over the left eye. Dred was already falling, his gun arm down. He pitched forward and crashed dully on his face, twisted in the anguish of death.

There was no time to check Prescott, no time to take breath. Conroy was coming, his men armed and ready. They were out in the dark, and could kill him through a window. The Ranger fired again, this time bisecting the white candle, which flipped out in the air, plunging the room into blackness.

"Prescott! Did you get him?" Conroy bawled in a high-pitched voice.

Hatfield whistled, shrill blasts that smote the night. Then, Conroy yelled again on the side where the sheds were.

"George! Go to that back door—he'll be out before you make it!"

Instead of making for the rear, as he figured Conroy must want him to do from his frantic shouts—undoubtedly the chief would send men to the door first of all—Hatfield smashed the glass of the window as he passed, thumbed a shot through, to place himself and draw their fire. Then he glided across the room to the opposite window. He was aware of a dozen Colts roaring, concentrating on the other window. He threw up the sash, ignoring the pains in his wounded calf. Without hesitation he dived through the opening, landing on his left shoulder in the soft dirt.

They were coming around the corners at both flanks as he came up, gun in hand. Hatfield's bullets hit a dark figure he could see against the sky. A shriek of pain sounded, and the guns from that direction shot wide of their mark. He kept shifting, aware that more and more were coming.

"Here he is! Come on, git him!" bellowed a gunman.

Hatfield darted away from the shack, a couple of scrawny spruce trees affording him slight protection. Bullets whirled about him, zipping in the needles of the trees, threatening to find him. The sharp stones sticking up cut at his bare feet, for he had left his boots with Goldy.

He whistled again. The pound of swift hoofs told him his pet was coming. He blasted back at the running dark forms he saw, at the flashes of guns hunting him.

His accurate shooting held them back while he gained fifty yards. Suddenly the golden sorrel streaked up, and Hatfield hit leather without touching iron, making a circus mount of it, Goldy only slowing a bit to let his rider up.

Howls of fury rose behind him. Bent low over the saddle, breath rasping in his powerful lungs, he turned, shooting to rattle them. A couple of

close ones whistled over his head. Goldy spurted, zigzagged, and raced away at a swift run.

Out of Colt range, Hatfield settled down to the business of riding. They had horses ready and set out in pursuit, but none could overtake the gelding, once Goldy was out ahead.

"I hope we don't hit one of them holes, that's all," murmured the Ranger, as he glanced back for signs of his enemies.

He rode over the rolling hills for an hour. For a third of that time he had been unable to hear anything or see anything of the foe.

"They've given up, I reckon," he decided, slowing the sorrel.

He pulled on his boots, fixed himself up. The blood was running from the wound in his leg and he bound it roughly with a strip of his clean shirt, carried in a saddle-bag.

At the Diablo River, he washed and drank, and the sorrel sucked in some liquid; then he crossed and headed toward the Crow Foot. The misty greyness at his back warned that dawn was close, he cantered the golden sorrel down the lane to the big spread.

ARMED guards challenged and identified him. He was allowed through, and found Hank Vernon asleep in the bunkhouse.

Vernon seized his hand, shook it happily.

"Mighty glad yuh're back, Jim. Them two skunks I fetched over from Conroy's are locked up under guard in the woodshed. They won't talk at all. We questioned 'em some but they got their lips buttoned."

"They'd stretch hemp if they did, I reckon," Hatfield replied. "Dred Prescott's dead, Vernon."

Hank started violently, staring at the imperturbable officer. "Say that agin!"

"Dred Prescott's dead. We had a little set-to at Conroy's and my bullet got there first."

Vernon was delighted. He held out his hand and pumped Hatfield's arm.

"He had it comin'. That's the end of a lot of trouble for us."

Hatfield shrugged. "Prescott was a field chief, that's all. Gonzales is another. A man like Conroy kin allus find sech when he needs 'em. I'm sorry it ain't Conroy who's pushin' up the grass roots 'stead of Prescott. A gunman's easy enough meat if yuh take him right."

He had a meal, as the new day turned lighter, but the sun was not yet up when he finished and rose.

"Now tell me where Skeleton Canyon is, Hank."

"It's twenty miles to the south of here. When the sun's up yuh'll be able to see Baldtop Mountain from the ridge. Baldtop sticks straight up and red rock shows around the peak. There's a horse trail straight to Baldtop, follerin' a little feeder brook that empties into the Diablo River a mile from here. Skeleton Canyon is two miles south of Baldtop, and the trail skirts it on the west side, on the way to the Mexican border. What's up?"

"I figger on makin' a checkup there. Somethin' I heard makes me think Gonzales and the black riders may be congregatin' there. In the meantime, yuh spend the day rallyin' yore friends. There's no time to lose. Start bringin' the women and kids here. Bancroft oughta be home in a wagon by nightfall, anyways. I'm goin' to leave that to you, Vernon, collectin' fightin' men, while I check up and see how best to strike down these killers."

"I'll do it. I better git started now."

Hatfield nodded. The two young men went out, Vernon to saddle Blueboy, and the Ranger to rub the sorrel over, and prepare for his dangerous run to Skeleton Canyon.

"I'm sorry Conroy smelt me out back there," he mused, as he mounted and started south from the Crow Foot. "Now I ain't certain what he'll do next."

Would the lawyer remember that Prescott had said, in Hatfield's hearing, that Gonzales and the riders were making ready for attack in Skeleton Canyon? Would the plan be carried through as Hatfield had overheard? He could not answer these questions, but he had to locate the great band of outlaws, killers and rustlers, riding under the aegis of Pablo Gonzales

and Conroy's treacherous henchmen.

No one could move with such stealth and cunning as Hatfield when he so desired. He reached the ridge top described by Vernon and as the sun was coming up, he could see the far-off Baldtop Mountain plainly, looming against the reddened sky. The Sierra Roya rose around him, wild and rocky, filled with canyons and brush-covered hiding places. He took to the farther side of the ridges, so that he might not be spied by sentinels as he approached.

CHAPTER XIII

Skeleton Canyon

LATE in the afternoon Jim Hatfield cautiously approached Skeleton Canyon, hoping to smell out the hiding place of the murderous gangs terrorizing the Texas district. He chose the hard way, from the west, picking faint, winding deer trails through the thickest growth. Vernon had given him landmarks which he had fixed in his trained mind. He was behind Baldtop mountain. When he figured he was within a mile or so of his objective, he decided to leave Goldy, for a while, a man could flit from shadow to shadow and rock to rock, a horse must take the open paths as a rule.

Hatfield removed his big spurs, wide Stetson and leather chaps, which would weigh him down and impede his progress in the brush. He took a long drink from his canteen and chewed some dried, jerked beef. Cutting a picket stake, he shoved it loosely into the ground while the sorrel watched.

"Don't go 'way," he ordered, patting Goldy's arched, sleek neck. "I'll be back."

The sorrel, seeing the picket stake, understood, and would not stray far from this point.

Hatfield slid off into the chaparral, eyes straining ahead. The brilliant sun caused the shadows to seem very intense. Skeleton Canyon was so well-hidden by natural effects that a rider who wasn't looking where he was going might have fallen over the steep edge of it. Hatfield crept to the brink, screened by a hedge of thorned brush, and looked down.

A great split in the earth showed as far as he could see. His vision was cut off by towering red rock pinnacles and pine trees growing in precarious footings. He had come up where the walls were sheer. Several hundred feet below were the tops of the thick jungle plants which had seized upon the dampness of the canyon as a home.

The Ranger gazed over the blank green-yellow roof. There was hardly a break in it; the stream which had cut the canyon was now just a little feeder, wining in and out, and practically covered over by interlocking vines and branches.

He lay there, flat on his belly, for an hour. The sun was slowly going down, tinging the Red Hills. He was looking for some sign which might point out the camp of the gangs he was hunting. They must cook, yet he did not see the slightest indication of smoke rising.

"It'll be supper time soon, though," he mused.

Drawing back, he crept along, keeping near the brink of the canyon. A quarter mile down the line, he spied what looked like a slide, and he approached it very carefully. There were butterflies and birds around. Far overhead, in the blue, a black speck wheeled, no doubt watching him—a Mexican buzzard waiting for his dinner.

The cliff walls had caved in and brush and piñons had taken root in the sides. He did not like the looks of the point, however, and instead of trying to get down in the canyon, he kept on with his survey. For two miles he eased along the western rim. The split began to narrow, and finally the stream entered a constricted gorge, running far below undercut walls. The canyon proper had reached its limit here, so he retired and worked back north, in the direction from which he had come.

Over the spur toes of Baldtop, looming overhead, the Ranger proceeded. The trail was on that side, and he had to cross it. The sun now was behind the Sierra Roya, which glowed a deep red. He hadn't much more light left in which to locate the bandit hideout.

The trail to Old Mexico crossed behind Baldtop and went down into a deep ravine, the northern terminus of Skeleton Canyon. He managed to get down without using the beaten way which he was certain would be closely watched and guarded. On the opposite side of the stream, where he had a drink, he climbed up on the rim and began to make a survey of that flank.

He had gone nearly three-quarters of the way without seeing any smoke or the slightest sign of a camp, when he paused. He was on top of a precipice, back from the rim in the brush screen.

His keen nostrils had caught the scent of cooking beef. Then his moving eyes noticed a faint vapor issuing from a crack, and he understood. The outlaws built their fire in a cave or under the bulge of the cliff, so the smoke did not rise up naturally but broke against the stone and dissipated.

Straining his ears, he thought he heard among the piping plaints of birds and insects, a faint sound of men's voices.

But he could not see any way to enter Skeleton Canyon undetected by those below. At only a few points did the steep walls fall away, and these were too exposed for use while it was light, at least.

The last sky illumination was almost gone. Near Baldtop, which was lowering darkly on its east face and glowing ruby red toward the setting sun, a large flock of crows winged off from the trail. Someone, the Ranger decided, was approaching. He went back toward Baldtop and heard loose stones rolling under the swift hoofs of a hard-ridden horse, down below.

He chose a spot closer to the canyon end than when he had crossed earlier. It was a ridge that ran up and down and hid him as he carefully descended among the dense growth of bushes.

Working in, he suddenly tensed and flattened out. A peaked sombrero had risen within twenty feet of him and a rifle barrel gleamed.

"*Halto!*" commanded a Mexican voice. "*Quien vive?*"

The man's back, however, was to Hatfield. Another man, a fellow in a flat hat, appeared beside the Mexican.

A rider swung on a lathered, quirted horse, around a big red boulder, and reined up. The Ranger recognized him at once. It was Joe Green, the self-appointed sheriff of Whiteville. The Mexican trail guard and his mate, who had been lying in the chaparral on the path leading into Skeleton Canyon, stepped into full view as Green sang out,

"Black-and-red, friend!"

"Oh—howdy, Green," the flat-hat said, while the Mexican in the peaked sombrero, dark face touched by a black mustache and sweeping sideburns, relaxed at the password.

"Evenin', Swartz. Is Gonzales here? I've got important orders for him."

"Yeah, he's in at the camp."

JOE GREEN rode on, passed the sentries. Hatfield, ears wide, tried to overhear further challenges, but could not if there were any. The sentinels retired into their hidden bivouac again and in the cracklings they made, Hatfield retreated back from the danger spot.

Night was at hand. Up on the canyon rim, the Ranger racked his brain in an effort to figure how he might enter the den of the killers. He knew the password, overheard as Green had given it, but he couldn't walk through, in his present guise.

He drew back, away from the faint trail which ran north and south, between Hudspeth and Old Mexico. In the dimness, a heaven-sent opportunity was sent him, as a *bravo,* no doubt one of Gonzales' riders came trotting along the path from the south.

The man was dark and narrow of face. He had bold, upturning mustaches and wore a high-peaked sombrereo trimmed with gold braid. Around his slim shoulders hung a silk

riding cape, a handsome garment which he wore from pride alone, for it was very warm.

The Ranger challenged him, voice tense but low.

"*Halto!* The password!"

"*Negro y rojo*—black-and-red," replied the bravo at once, in Spanish and then English. He cursed his mustang as the startled animal reared in alarm at the sudden apparation rising from the brush.

Hatfield's fist clubbed the bravo's chin, dazing him. The startled horse was rearing and snorting in fright. Hatfield held on for dear life, cutting off the Mexican's wind, and at last the bronco quieted, and the man in front of Hatfield went limp.

Ten minutes later the tall officer rode the hairy little mustang down the trail. The Mexican lay back in the monte, bound hand and foot with a gag sealing his lips.

When the Mysterious and Dreaded Shotgun Riders Harass Cieñaga Valley, the Lone Wolf Lawman Faces the Toughest Assignment of His Career

IN

LONE STAR COURAGE

A Complete Book-Length Jim Hatfield Novel

By JACKSON COLE

Featured in the Next Issue of TEXAS RANGERS

"*Bueno*—good! Pass, friend," Hatfield growled, and stepped out on the narrow trail.

The Mexican was busy for the moment with his horse, fighting the beast for control and with the genius of his race at such work. The hairy mustang had whirled around, and Hatfield was just behind them. Without hesitation the Ranger made his leap. He was up behind the fellow, a powerful hand and arm coming around to grip the Mexican's scrawny throat. Then Hat-

Darkness had descended upon the Red Hills with the suddenness of a velvet blanket. Hatfield was wearing the Mexican's outfit, the peaked sombrero pulled down to his eyebrows and strapped tight. He had smeared his face with red clay, darkening his bronze complexion. The cloak hung from his hunched-up shoulders and his long legs were pulled up nearly level with his seat. He went right on down to the trail and rode boldly toward the spot where he knew the

guards were hidden, watching the trail into Skeleton Canyon.

The challenge came.

"*Halto*—the password!"

"*Negro y rojo*—black-an'-red," Hatfield said at once. In colloquial Spanish he added, "I must speak to El Jefe tonight."

"He's in there. Go on."

The mustang seemed to know the way. It went on through a narrow gap and the canyon floor widened out. The path ran alongside the stream for a time, then diverged to the right, and the Ranger, after a mile run, saw a faint red glow straight ahead among the trees.

Men were thick as fallen leaves in the canyon — Texans and Mexicans, the gangs of Dred Prescott and Pablo Gonzales, united for the blow against the county folk. As Hatfield had deduced from the vapor he had smelled, they had a fire going in a big, scooped-out cavern under the cliff.

They could keep powder, ammunition, weapons and saddles, even sleep there if they wanted shelter.

Hatfield dropped off his mustang, leaving it with the great band in the flat. He saw, under the shading sombrero brim, fierce-eyed killers lounging around, some working at guns or gear, others drinking, eating or talking with one another. The Texans were at the lower end of the camp, hanging together, perhaps seventy of them. The Mexicans, as many or more, were at the other end.

Hatfield started that way. He slouched along, trying to hide his size and height by scrunching down in the draped cloak. Then he heard a shrill female voice.

"You see my sweetheart, Dred, Joe?" she demanded.

Hatfield stopped, squatted down. He began to roll a quirly. Beyond a few glances, no attention was paid him. The two gangs had recently joined forces and newcomers were still arriving, answering the call of Pablo Gonzales.

The woman who had spoken was Conchita Gonzales. She stood close to the giant figure of her outlaw father. Pablo yawned, white teeth gleaming in the pinkish light. He had evidently just been aroused from sleep to talk to Green. In answer to the girl's question, Green said impatiently, "Yeah, yeah, Conchita, Dred's fine. He sent word yuh was to go ahead and do as the Boss says. It's a job for a woman, savvy? Git goin', pronto."

"*Si, si,* I go. I go now. We weel be at Guzman by daybreak."

"Good girl."

Green stared at Pablo Gonzales. Hatfield thought he saw the big deputy wink. Gonzales shrugged; Green signalled behind Conchita's back, and frowned. Gonzales understood. He turned to his men, and gave swift orders, designating twenty Mexicans to act as an escort to Conchita.

"Guzman—that must be across the border, near the lake," mused Hatfield. "Now what kind of job could Conroy have for Conchita?"

CHAPTER XIV

Unexpected Trouble

EVERY action graceful, the beautiful young Mexican girl went to the cave, one side of which had been screened off by a blanket for her use. She picked up her hat there, and a man was called, who brought out her saddle and got her mustang ready to ride. While she was busy, Green seized Pablo Gonzales' arm and led him aside. Hatfield got up and slouched closer, straining his ears. A boulder helped him get closer, and he leaned against one side of it, just able to hear Green's quick words.

"Listen, Gonzales, Prescott's dead. He was shot by that big Ranger hombre that kilt yore son! Keep it to yoreself. Conchita mustn't know. She'd fly off the handle and we need her for that job. The Boss had to change his plans, savvy?"

"Yi, yi," grunted Gonzales, swearing in a low voice. "Conchita—my

poor baby! Her heart she weel break. Firs' Rafael, now her lovaire!"

"Hold yore nerve," Green warned. "Keep yore boys here, ready, till yuh hear from us. It won't be long."

They moved off, voices lost in the shuffle. Hatfield could not follow as they went to the fire, and he could not take a chance on showing himself in the full light. He shifted his position, apparently busy, so that no one would challenge or speak to him. The score of dark-faced Mexicans picked by Gonzales as Conchita's escort were strapping on their carbines and pistol belts, saddling up their hairy mustangs.

Gonzales sang out a command. The twenty men stepped to a wooden box standing by the side of the cave and Hatfield saw them dip their hands into it, then apply their hands to their faces, rubbing their cheeks with whatever was in the box. As one after another turned away from the box, Hatfield saw their faces were black.

He had placed the gangs, and from what Green had said, knew they would not move for a time. What Conchita's "job" was, he could not guess, but he had found out enough so that he could lead an attacking party on the canyon.

He eased toward the box where a Mexican had just stooped down to blacken his face. Gonzales had gone over to the other side, Green to find a drink from a bottle in the cave. Hatfield bent down and took some of the black powder. He rubbed his cheeks, and blacked his face with the stuff. Then, he strolled over, picked a mustang and saddled up.

Conchita was ready to ride. She was pretty as a picture, and it was difficult to believe she was a bandit's woman, daughter of one, and in love with another killer who had received his desserts at Ranger hands.

In the confusion of the departure, Jim Hatfield rode out at the tail end of the caravan of Mexicans, hunched over his bronco. He passed the sentry post, and the horses climbed up to the east side of Skeleton Canyon, and started on the route to Mexico.

Hatfield hung behind, and as the trail swung in and out, he was able to drop out of sight completely in the soft night. He sat the hairy mustang for a minute, listening to the faint sounds of the retreating Mexicans. Then he turned his horse and rode to pick up Goldy, well-pleased with his fresh information.

IT took Hatfield over two hours to work back in the darkness to the point where he had left the golden sorrel. To return to the Crow Foot by the faint, devious animal trails he had used on his way to Skeleton Canyon was practically impossible; he would be all night making a few miles.

The change in plans forced on Conroy by Hatfield's killing of Dred Prescott, leader of the black riders, had given him vital time needed in which to collect the ranchers and strike at the great band of gunmen marshalled by Conroy, Green and Gonzales.

The Ranger had been living on snatches of sleep for days. Now he could rest. At the crack of dawn, when he could see to move faster, he could reach the Crow Foot with little loss of precious hours.

As greyness touched the Sierra Roya, Hatfield rolled out of his blanket, had a drink and a short breakfast. He saddled up, turning loose the hairy mustang he had taken from the outlaw camp and headed back for the Crow Foot.

"Wonder if Bancroft's home yit," he mused. "That wound wasn't so bad as it looked."

About three o'clock he drove up the long lane to the ranch, and hailed the cowboy sentries, who nodded silently and let him through.

"Is the Boss home?" Hatfield asked the foreman, as he pulled up in the corral yard.

"Yeah, he's here," grunted the cowboy.

Hank Vernon came out on the side porch, and Hatfield waved to him. After turning the golden sorrel loose in the corral, he went over to join his friend.

"Howdy, Vernon. Everything's set.

I found 'em. They're all up in Skeleton Canyon and they'll be there long enough for us to strike."

Hatfield spoke in a low voice; his information was valuable and must be kept secret. Vernon was a trusted lieutenant, and the Ranger counted on him to whip together the cowmen of the Red Hills for the attack on their enemies.

Hank Vernon looked straight into Hatfield's eyes and the officer had a queer feeling that something was wrong. Vernon dropped his gaze, muttered something, then turned on his heels and growled, "C'mon in, Jim. Bancroft's home."

Hatfield scratched his head, and trailed Vernon through the cool, big room to a square chamber on the opposite side of the huge house. Bancroft was lying on his bed. He was dressed except for his boots and Stetson.

"Afternoon, Bancroft. How yuh feelin'?" asked Hatfield, taking a chair by the bed.

"I'm feelin' okay," Ban replied.

"The wound ain't botherin' yuh much?"

"The wound ain't botherin' me much."

Something was wrong. Hatfield sensed it, began to probe for it. Hank Vernon stood at the foot of the bed, a hand on the footboard; Hatfield saw that Hank's knuckles were white, he was gripping the wood so tight.

"I hope," Hatfield drawled, "that Vernon's got yore friends in line, and ready to strike, Bancroft. This is the moment. We can be at Skeleton Canyon by midnight and hit them right in their den."

BANCROFT was frowning. He met the Ranger's eye. "Now looka here, Ranger! I'm obliged and all that but we've changed our plans. We've decided to sit tight."

Hatfield got up. He glanced quickly at Vernon, who cried, "Jim! Yeah, I told him who yuh are but I didn't tell nobody else. It ain't my fault—nor Ban's either."

There was a sickly yellow hue under the huge rancher's tanned cheeks. Hatfield had ascribed it to the wound, but now he realized Bancroft was in a terrible state of mind, almost crazy and holding himself in by sheer strength of his will. Vernon was in the same fix. He kept licking his lips and there were dark circles under his youthful eyes.

"What's wrong?" Hatfield demanded.

"Nuthin'," said Bancroft quickly. "We give yuh our thanks, Jim, and hope yuh won't hold it agin us. We ain't got any need for yore help, and I'm sorry we troubled yuh. I'm wore out. I reckon I better git some sleep." He turned on his side, back to Hatfield.

Hatfield wheeled and left the room. Vernon came out a minute later, and the Ranger gripped his wrist.

"C'mon, let's have it, Hank."

"What—yuh mean?"

"Yuh know what I mean. Did yuh figger after all this that I'd ride back to Austin and call it quits?" Hatfield was angry but at the same time he was puzzled.

"If yuh keer about us at all, Jim, do that." Vernon was entirely miserable.

"Where's Ellen?" Hatfield asked, so suddenly that Vernon jumped.

Vernon was a trifle slow in replying. "We—we left her in Whiteville with her aunt."

Hatfield knew he had hit it. His thoughts fairly raced through his keen mind.

"Yuh're lyin', Vernon. They've kidnaped Ellen, haven't they?"

"Yes."

Hatfield drew in a deep breath of the warm afternoon air. Now he understood.

"How'd they git her?" he demanded.

"There were four of our men outside her door and others within call. It was the middle of the night and she was asleep. A couple of drunks took the boys' attention. While they were makin' this fuss, others of our enemies got through a window, gagged her, and toted her out."

Hatfield turned this over in his

mind. "Have yuh heard from Conroy yit?"

"Yeah, indirect-like."

"I'll go back and talk to Bancroft."

Bancroft turned sticken eyes on the tall man as Hatfield came back into the bedroom.

"It's no use, Ranger," the rancher muttered. "I see Vernon's told yuh."

"I said he'd worm it outa us if he didn't guess it," growled Vernon.

"I ain't blamin' yuh, Hank." To the Ranger he went on, "Call me anything yuh like, a yeller skunk, a coward, Jim, but the fight's gone out of me." I'll never lay eyes on her again if I don't do as—" He broke off.

"As Conroy tells yuh," Hatfield finished for him. He sent word he'd return yore daughter if yuh turned over yore ranch to his agents, didn't he?"

"That's it," growled Vernon. "I'm quittin', too, Jim. I'd like to fight but nuthin' I got is as valuable as Ellen. Ban and me figger on movin' to a new range and settin' up fresh. If yuh horn in, and keep pressin' the black riders, yuh'll be the cause of Ellen's death."

HATFIELD was silent for a time. He could not reproach them. They were in sheer agony. Conroy had chosen the one method by which to break the spirits of these two.

"Conroy didn't reach yuh direct, did he?" he asked at last.

"No, he didn't. An hombre from Whiteville who's a friend of Conroy's come ridin' to the ranch. He talked to me, but said nuthin' straight. However, it amounted to what we've told yuh."

"Conroy's mighty slippery," Hatfield remarked aloud. "He covers himself ev'ry move he makes."

If he arrested Conroy, provided he could find him now, how much good would that do? Conroy had already been tried for murder and got away with it. He no doubt had lying witnesses ready to supply him with necessary alibis.

"Where would they take her and hold her?" he thought to himself. "Whiteville? No, that wouldn't be safe; nor would Conroy's ranch. He'd savvy we'd look there fust of all if we started huntin', and Ellen would be too dangerous a witness for him to take to his house—"

"Jim, I spoke to some of our friends," Vernon broke in on his reverie, "and they was agreeable to bandin' together as yuh said. But we had to call it off."

Hatfield nodded. His anger against Bancroft and Vernon had subsided. Now he was trying to figure how to save Ellen and at the same time defeat Conroy. Green and Conroy had roused many people of the Red Hills against him, by lies, by false actions. He needed Vernon and Bancroft, leaders in the community, to collect the necessary fighting men he must have, in a hurry. Delay might prove fatal. While Bancroft and Vernon were ready to give up everything in their attempt to save Ellen, there were many more people involved, the luckless inhabitants of the Sierra Roya against whom Conroy no doubt would hurl his lawless, murderous legions as soon as he had settled Bancroft's hash. Surrender to the black riders did not mean safety. The Phillips had sold out, and then had died by outlaw guns.

So stunning had been the defection of Hank Vernon and Bancroft, who had disappointed him as he moved along the dangerous trail left by the horrible Conroy, that other thoughts had been swept from his head. But now his mind began clicking again, and suddenly he had it.

"Conchita!" he mused. "Now I savvy what that job of hers is!"

Without the shadow of a doubt, the task relegated to the beautiful Mexican dancehall girl was to watch over Ellen Bancroft as she was held in her hidden prison!

Hatfield's grim face was a mask, hiding his racing thoughts.

"Guzman! That's it. They're run Ellen across the Rio Grande into Mexico!" He turned it all over. The task of smashing the black riders and Gonzales' Mexicans was one where he needed a striking force. Bancroft could supply the necessary fighters;

but Bancroft was broken, because Ellen was in the hands of the foe.

"I'll go down and fetch her back," he decided.

CHAPTER XV

Ranger's Chance

FIGURING that if he could pick up Ellen and run her back to safety, Bancroft would brace and rally his friends, Jim Hatfield resolved to risk his life in a rescue attempt. He needed Hank Vernon, but doubted that Hank would dare move against the enemy if he knew what Hatfield contemplated. A slip might prove fatal to Vernon's sweetheart.

"Okay, Bancroft," Hatfield said aloud, with a shrug of his broad shoulders. "The Rangers won't horn in where they ain't wanted by decent folks like yoreself. I reckon Conroy's won this pot."

Bancroft heaved a sigh of relief. "Good, Jim. We was afeared yuh'd keep on in spite of anything we could say and that would mean Ellen might be killed. Yuh ridin' on?"

"I reckon I might as well. Vernon, would yuh come along a ways? There's some things I'd like to tell yuh. Yuh kin tend to them when I'm gone."

"Okay," agreed Hank.

Vernon trailed the tall man outside, and while the Ranger made Goldy ready for a long ride, Hank saddled Blueboy. Mounted, the two stalwart young Texans rode toward the main road leading to Whiteville and eventually the Pecos.

Hank Vernon kept apologizing, justifying Bancroft's surrender. Hatfield clucked his lips in sympathy, saying little until they were some miles from the ranch.

"Dawggone that cinch," exclaimed the Ranger. "It keeps lettin' go."

He dismounted, as Blueboy forged ahead a few feet. Vernon pulled up while Hatfield appeared to be fiddling with one of the cinches of his double-fire saddle.

"Would yuh mind takin' hold on the other side, Hank?" asked Hatfield. "I can't seem to git her tight.

Vernon dismounted and went to the opposite flank of the sorrel. Blueboy, reins dropped, waited patiently.

"Why, I don't see nuthin' wrong—" began Vernon. He stopped short, for the long legs of the Ranger were no longer visible under Goldy and Vernon heard his friend right behind him.

"I don't want to wing yuh, Hank," Hatfield said coolly, "but I'll hafta if yuh make a break!"

"What's the idea?" growled Vernon, staring into the blue-black muzzle of the big officer's Colt .45.

"Raise yore hands, and unbuckle your gun-belt."

His face a dark study, Vernon obeyed. He had seen Hatfield in action and anyway, he would not fight against the Ranger who had come to the Sierra Roya to help the cowmen. He did not understand at all what Jim Hatfield meant to do.

Carefully he undid the strap of his big belt, which supported his guns, let the loop drop around his spurred boots, and stepped away, his hands elevated. A fighter, Hank Vernon did not like to surrender, but he was so amazed that he could think of nothing to do about this strange situation.

"*Bueno,*" Hatfield said pleasantly. "Kin I have yore word of honor yuh won't try to escape, Hank, or shall I tie yore hands down fast to the saddle-horn?"

Vernon frowned. "It depends where we're goin'. Am I under arrest, Ranger?"

"Call it that. For yore own good. What do yuh say? Shall yuh ride free and easy or hooked up like an outlaw?"

Hank licked his mustached lip. "I don't savvy why yuh're doin' this. I got to be at the Crow Foot."

"Shore. Yuh sent a reply to Conroy and yuh're expectin' his messenger back again with the terms and instructions," Hatfield replied cheerfully.

"Bancroft will hafta handle all that."

Vernon shrugged. "Yuh have my word of honor," he growled. "But I'll never forgive yuh for this."

Hatfield did not answer. He watched Vernon climb on Blueboy. Then he mounted, and they swung off the road, taking a faint trail leading over the red southern ridges of the Sierras. Hatfield stayed slightly to the rear but he knew he could trust Vernon. Such a man would die before he broke his sworn word.

On they rode, leaving the ranches behind, and striking into the wild country that interposed between Hudspeth and Mexico. The sun set and stars twinkled out in the heavens. A chunk of golden moon gave a little more light.

"How far we goin', Ranger?" Vernon queried in a cold voice.

"Guzman. Ever hear tell of it?"

"Yes. It lies jist across the Rio Grande. There's a little lake there, and a few dobie shacks with thatched roofs. Why?"

"I'll tell yuh why when we git near. Yuh reckon we kin make it 'fore next dawnin'?"

"Easy, if we hustle. We oughta be there by two or three o'clock."

"Lead the way and hustle. The quicker we git to Guzman, the sooner yuh git back to the Crow Foot."

Under this impetus, Vernon led Hatfield to a fairly wide steer track which they were able to follow through the night with a reasonable degree of speed. The moon was up over Baldtop, some miles to their left as they headed south for the Rio Grande.

Hours later they crossed the muddy river into Mexico. Great cacti thrust their tortuous arms to the milky sky. The hot wind blew grit in their faces, whipping at their strapped hats. Sand was the chief footing, for they were in the unproductive deserts of Chihuahua.

"There's Guzman," Hank Vernon growled after a short interval.

Hatfield instantly pulled up, Blueboy obeying the jerk of his reins, too. Ahead, Hatfield could see dark blobs on the face of the landscape, and the gleam of the moon on a small body of water.

IT was like an oasis in the desert. All was silent; save for the piping of night insects. No lights could be seen.

"Keep yore nerve, Hank," Hatfield warned. "That's where they're holdin' Ellen."

"What!" stammered Vernon, nearly jumping out of his saddle.

"I'll lay yuh a thousand to a doughnut. We're goin' to take her out."

"But—but why didn't yuh tell me—?"

"Because I wasn't shore even then yuh'd come. I need yuh to take her back home when she's free. Savvy? Yuh're to stick here and hold the horses, and be ready."

"I will. But how—?"

"Don't make any noise. The wind's away from there but there's a passel of armed bandits watchin' the spot."

Vernon could scarcely contain his excitement, his anxiety. He watched as Hatfield pulled off his Stetson, hung it on Goldy's saddle-horn; he substituted moccasins for his spurred riding boots.

"Wait here for me," ordered the Ranger. "I'll be back. She may be with me, so don't fail us."

Hatfield slipped away, keeping to the shadows cast by the huge cactus growths. Where the waters of the lake irrigated the desert, larger trees grew and under these were built the homes of those who dwelt in Guzman.

It was a small Mexican settlement off the beaten track, and the few inhabitants, besides doing a profitable business selling food and tequila to Gonzales and his bandit crew, ran half-wild, long-horned steers in the chaparral for a living and raised large numbers of pigs. His work as a Texas Ranger often taking him into Mexico, according to the reciprocal and tacit agreement between Rangers and Rurales, the Mexican police, Hatfield had seen many villages of the same kind as Guzman.

A genius at scouting, he worked in,

checking the buildings of the sleeping town. He was staking everything on Ellen Bancroft being here and on his ability to snatch her from the hands of her captors. Though so much depended on the success of this foray, he was careful, unhurried, and the blood in his veins ran cool. No excitement or apprehension disturbed his swift reflexes.

"We'll need an extra horse for her," he mused, as he squatted behind a huge, spined cactus, peering through the gloom at a good-sized hacienda, the largest building in the town. It had a wall made of stakes with thick vines growing on it, and the gate was closed. He could see the white of the adobe-brick walls, and the thick shape of the thatched roof peeping over the enclosure.

Making the rounds, he did not see any other structure that might be used as a prison for Ellen Bancroft. Most of them were small, poorly built huts, the hovels of peons shared by animals and innumerable offspring. He came back to the large place with the stockade around it, and on the shadowed side, crept up to the wall.

He was just tall enough to look over through a gap in the palings. There was a good-sized yard. He saw the rear of the hacienda and swore to himself as he noted the up-and-down lines against the windows. Iron bars! It complicated the task, for he would have a difficult time prying loose the steel bars set in the openings.

A MAN coughed faintly. It was close at hand, and Hatfield ducked his bare head. A cigarette glowed and the Ranger saw a slim, dark figure walk down the side of the hacienda, a guard on patrol. The Mexican was carrying a rifle and approached the rear of the house. On the other flank a second sentry paced, and they met, speaking to one another in low tones, then swinging to return on their beat.

"They've got her in there. That cinches it," decided Hatfield.

The guards told him there was an important captive in the walled hacienda. They also meant he would have a more difficult time in taking Ellen Bancroft out. He must have spare horses.

This was comparatively easy. He retired from the palisades and in a broken-down stable off from the shacks, he found mustangs, their high-pronged, fancy saddles hanging on the wall. He muzzled two of them, using strips of his shirt, and saddling up, led them out and back to where the uneasy Vernon awaited him.

"Jim—that you? Did—yuh see her?" Hank was on pins and needles and whispered hoarsely, stepping to meet the Ranger.

"Take it easy. She's in there. I fetched out a horse for her. Now pull yoreself together and listen keerful. We're goin' to take the horses in closer, up behind the house where they're holdin' her. Yuh'll wait, and I'll pass her over the wall to yuh, savvy? Yuh're to put her on this back mustang I brought yuh and ride *west* at once. West, understand? They'll figger yuh've rode nawth and they'll start that way. Kin yuh git back to the Crow Foot on another trail from the one we come down on?"

"Yeah, I know a way ten mile west of here."

Vernon spoke quietly. The time for action had come and he pulled himself into line, cooling down. He nodded as Hatfield pointed out the dark, ghostly shape of the hacienda with its palisades.

"Do yuh need to muzzle Blueboy?"

"No; he'll keep quiet if I tell him."

"Do it, then. Yuh'll hold four horses: Goldy, these two mustangs and Blueboy. One mustang's for Ellen. Leave the other with its reins hitched to Goldy's saddle-horn. When yuh start off, turn Goldy and the spare horse loose. Remember, be where I've told yuh, and no matter what yuh hear after yuh have Ellen, don't turn back!"

Hank Vernon nodded. "I'll do jist what yuh say."

"Okay. Here we go."

"What yuh doin' now?" asked Vernon in a low voice, as Hatfield fum-

bled hurriedly at his saddle-bags.

"Gittin' ready." Hatfield unrolled the fine felt sombrero he had used in his foray into the enemy's camp at Skeleton Canyon. He had the tight Mexican pants, the cape, which he had taken from the bravo on the trail. In a jiffy the Ranger had switched his costume and in the night, slouched down, his silhouette was that of a Mexican vaquero. He smeared dirt on his face, and Vernon stared at him, comprehending what he was doing in disguising himself, although Hank had no idea of the bold conception of the rescue as planned by the tall, intrepid officer.

The barred windows, the sentinels, the fact that he had no way of finding in which room they might be keeping Ellen Bancroft, had made stealth impossible. The Ranger realized that he must resort to trickery, and his quick mind had seized upon the insolently brave plan he was now putting into execution. It would be make or break; he would succeed or—he did not think of failure. He was counting on the use of psychology. He knew Mexicans and their reactions in times of stress.

Mounting one of the hairy mustangs, he said, "Count to a hundred, then swing a wide circle and come along the lake shore till yuh're where the shadows of them tall trees on the bank'll let yuh in to the back of the hacienda. Pay no attention to what yuh hear, savvy?"

"I got it." Vernon gripped the tall man's slim, powerful hand. "I'll be there, Jim."

He began to count under his breath as Hatfield reached down, unmuzzled the Mexican horse, and cut over to the road leading into the settlement from the Rio Grande.

CHAPTER XVI

Adventure in Mexico

KICKING the beast's ribs with his high-heeled riding boots, the Ranger sent the animal lunging straight toward the hacienda. He headed for the double gates in front, closed and barred on the inside for the night. Under the cloak, his heavy Colts were loaded and ready in their holsters.

A hundred yards from the hacienda gates, the Ranger set up a shrill howling.

"Ai-ai! Ai-ai! Señorita Conchita—Señorita Conchita—ai-ai! Yi-yi—Señorita Conchita Gonzales—"

Men ran toward the gates at his approach, startlingly noisy in the darkness. Sleepers awoke in the hacienda.

"*Halto*—halt!" a guard shouted, rifle clicking ready. "Who are you? Why are you here?"

"I come from the north! Where is Señorita Gonzales? Yi-yi—yi-yi! Señorita Conchita! Quick, I must talk to the señorita!" He shrilled in colloquial Spanish and the terrific excitement in his voice communicated itself at once to the Mexicans. "*Qué lastima*—what a pity."

A light sprang up in the house. A woman screamed in there. The bars were dropped and the Ranger rode through the gates into the patio. Chains and bolts clanked and the front door came open before him. Armed Mexicans clustered around him, all of them demanding in loud voices what was wrong.

"Señorita Conchita—your father sent me! Ai-ai!"

The grief and horror in his voice sent chills racing through the veins of the hearers. A slim form rushed from the open door.

"What is it—what's the matter?"

Conchita Gonzales, in a skimpy white dress thrown on over her night clothes, dashed out.

"*Señor Prescott está muer-to! El pobrecito—muerto!*—Prescott is dead—the poor boy—dead! Shot by the murderous guns of the Texas Rurale—"

A piercing cry issued from Conchita's lips. She whirled around like a beheaded chicken. Hatfield threw himself from his horse, as the Mexicans crowded around the young woman, crying in sympathy with her.

"No, no! He cannot be dead!"

"Si—está muerto!"

The wailing and shrieking rose with deafening din to the night sky. Conchita was the center of all eyes, as she stormed and broke down in turn. A couple of older women ran out to seize her in their arms. Taking advantage of the confusion, Hatfield slipped in the open door and looked quickly about.

A door opened to his left, near the back wing. A pale-faced young woman peeked out. It was Ellen Bancroft.

He crossed at once, and she spoke to the apparent Mexican in Spanish.

"What is it, señor? What's wrong tonight?"

A moment later he was beside her, touching her wrist. She recoiled but his whisper sent a sudden flash of wild hope and joy across her pretty eyes.

"I'm Jim—Hank's right outside. Kin we unlock that back door on yore wing from inside?"

"Oh, Jim—I—yes, yes—"

SHE drew back and he glanced over his shoulder. The Mexicans were out there, shrieking, Conchita raising the heavens with her grief.

A man ran inside, hands to his temples. His dark eyes saw the Ranger by the door leading to the wing.

"Messenger of bad news," he growled, "why aren't you outside?"

He forgot his purpose in coming in, which was to pick up a bottle of tequila to drown the horror he felt, and turned to the wing. Ellen had drawn back into the darkness of the bedroom.

"This way—I must show you something," gasped Hatfield. "It is too terrible, *amigo mio*—" He took the Mexican's arm and pulled him into the bedroom.

"What is it?" demanded the excited guard.

"This!"

Hatfield's Colt slammed down on the Mexican's head, and the bandit fell like a poleaxed steer.

The Ranger stepped over the lax form, and Ellen took his hand. She was trembling, in excitement.

"Where's Hank? she asked, as she led him toward the rear of the wing. "He's out there?"

"Shore. Waitin'. Hurry, now."

She had seen enough of her prison to know the way out into the walled patio. A bolt and chain undone, Hatfield pulled back the door and peeked outside. The yard was empty here, for all had rushed around to the front at the alarm.

In a few moments they were at the high, thorned fence. Hatfield glanced through the gap. He saw Vernon coming in, leading the horses. "Vernon!" he called, softly.

"Yeah, Jim, here I am! Is Ellen—?"

"Come here and take her."

In his strong arms, the Ranger picked up the girl as though she were a feather and lifted her over the top of the fence. Hank seized her and lowered her to the ground.

"Mount and ride," ordered Hatfield.

Hank helped the girl to Blueboy's back and mounted the Mexican horse.

"Adios, Jim, good luck—" he whispered hoarsely.

"Git! Soon as yuh're home, call yore fighters together!"

As they started off in the dark shadows, loud yells sounded behind the Ranger, and he turned.

"The messenger, the messenger! Where's the vaquero who brought the bad news?"

Armed men came hurrying through the house, and around the sides of the hacienda. They saw his tall, dark form as he wheeled to face them.

"There he is! From where did you come, vaquero?" shouted one in the lead. "Your bronco is not sweated. Did you lie to us or—?"

A woman, one of the older ones, suddenly screamed from inside, "She is gone—the girl is gone!"

An excited Mexican raised his gun, fired at Hatfield. The bullet whistled over his sombrero. He drew a Colt, and to hold them, shot into the wall, cutting crunks of mud from the corners.

At his second volley, one of them yipped and staggered. The rest scattered, leaping for cover.

Suspicions aroused, and now verified, they prepared at once to take him. But Hatfield pouched his gun, seized the top of the palings with both hands, and vaulted over. The long, dried thorns of the thick vines clutched at his clothing, scratched exposed flesh. Heedless of all this, he scrambled over and landed on his hands and knees in the soft earth beneath the palisades.

Pandemonium was let loose in the hacienda. The guards were yelling to one another, dashing toward the spot where he had disappeared. Wild lead came over the palings, as Hatfield picked himself up and lurched toward the ghostly shapes of the two horses near at hand. His wounded leg bothered him and he couldn't run well. His whistle started Goldy toward him, dragging the Mexican horse, whose reins were wound around the horn of his saddle.

Hatfield hit leather without touching iron, jerked the sorrel's reins, and started around the lower end of the big enclosure.

As he rode, skirting the palisades, he glanced up when he came to the front side. Men were pouring from the gates.

"There they go!"

They saw the fleeting shapes beyond the circle of light, pounding off, two horses bunched together. The Ranger kept the mustang on his right, so that his body and the big gelding partially blocked the view from the hacienda. In the uncertain light they assumed the girl was with him. He swung onto the road leading to the Rio Grande and the north, as they expected him to do, and pounded that way.

Quickly horses were brought forth, and the pursuit began. In the night, riding under the stars and the slice of moon, Hatfield stayed well enough in front so they could not make out that the second horse was not carrying weight.

Now and then he would return their wild gunfire to keep them occupied. He led them on for several miles, and they trailed him all the way to the Rio Grande, where he splashed over to the Texas shore. Many of them pushed into the river and kept after him. In the wild land along the historic stream, the Ranger was hidden in the bloodweeds bunched thickly along the banks. Guns blared, their loads hunting him blindly. The Mexican horse was laboring. Hatfield had been holding back the swift sorrel. Now he turned the stallion loose, driving him into thick chaparral up the shore.

He swung north for the trail which skirted Skeleton Canyon, taking care to shoot several times to hold his pursuers' attention.

He had given Vernon and Ellen a good start, and, with a satisfied backward glance at the enemy, he offered Goldy his head and the gelding drew rapidly away from the stunted mustangs, flogged to bloody foam by their fierce riders.

Keeping on the trail he had chosen, as the first smudge of dawn spoiled the night sky, Hatfield found he was nearing the outlaw rendezvous. He hunted for loose shale before swinging off into the brush, pausing to close the gap made by his horse when he was inside the wall of branches and leaves. Hiding his trail, he moved slowly, and finally stopped altogether on a little ridge which overlooked the trail. Rubbing Goldy dry, he waited. After an interval, he heard his pursuers pass by on the trail over the lower end of Skeleton Canyon.

He must sleep, rest from the terrific exertions he had undergone. Hidden in the rocks and pines, he lay down, his head on his saddle.

"They'll report to Gonzales," he thought. "And then what? Gonzales will send a messenger pronto to Conroy, askin' for orders. What will Conroy do?"

WITH Ellen Bancroft no longer a hostage, the positions of the two factions had radically changed. Ban Bancroft no longer would fear to fight.

"Conroy'll try for a wipe-out, a million to one," he mused. "It's his only chance now. He'll hit, hopin' to mop up 'fore we kin be set."

A mass battle was shaping up, as the Ranger sparred with his invisible adversary, Michael Conroy. Hatfield could not take any chances of not being ready for it. Hank Vernon and Ban Bancroft could now carry out his orders to collect their friends. They had been relieved by Hatfield's work of the horrible torture which Conroy had imposed upon them when he stole Ellen away.

Hatfield was aware of the keen boldness of his arch-enemy. Conroy kept himself in the clear, so far as the law went, never doing anything he couldn't squirm out of. He would not take part in the battle, that was certain, but he would order it through trusted lieutenants. And if it were successful, Conroy would seize the lion's share of the loot.

"Attack, and right away, is his only answer," decided Hatfield as he dropped off to sleep.

A few hours later he aroused, feeling refreshed. He tended the sorrel, saddled up and checked his guns. After a quick drink from his warm canteen, he started to work down past the point where the canyon trail guards were posted. It was slow going and the sun beat with intense ferocity on the chaparral and woods.

He reached the toes of Baldtop, the mountain landmark around which the little creek which had made Skeleton Canyon brawled its way to the Diablo River. A flash in the sky, over the trail which ran in from the rangelands, warned him, as did birds moving from over the rough way, that someone was coming. He dismounted, and crept over, peeking down into the ravine as the rider came down, hitting the trail that led into the outlaw rendezvous.

It was Joe Green, the young deputy who had taken Sheriff Williams' place. Green was evidently taking Dred Prescott's place as Conroy's chief lieutenant. He was in a hurry, and his horse was heavily lathered, as he quirted the big animal on.

"That's it," ruminated Hatfield, watching Green dash on toward Skeleton Canyon. "Just as I figgered, he's bringin' Conroy's orders to Gonzales."

The Ranger moved on, picking up Goldy, leading his pet through the difficult places, until he was around Baldtop and could take to the open trail, miles from the bandit hideout. Then he made tracks for the Crow Foot, pulling in at supper time.

Wagons and saddle horses stood in the big yard about Bancroft's. Armed men, ranchers of the district, were all around. Women and children had been brought over to the Crow Foot, and were encamped inside the big hacienda. Hatfield was greeted with a cheer by the cowboys as he rode up.

HANK VERNON came hurrying outside. He had been on the go all day, dispatching messengers to call in the ranchers to battle.

Hatfield strode inside, Vernon at his flank. Ban Bancroft was sitting up in a chair in his bedroom. Close beside him was Ellen. Eagerly Bancroft shook the Ranger's hand, while both father and daughter thanked him for what he had done.

Strategy occupied the Ranger's mind. He had a fair idea now of the immediate district, and he was practically sure that Conroy would attack the big Crow Foot first. It was the heart of the resistance to his desires.

"Hide them wagons and keep these folks outa sight," Hatfield told Vernon. "Conroy'll likely send in scouts 'fore he hits and I don't want him to savvy how many fightin' men we got."

"I told 'em all to come over keerful-like," Hank said. "There'll be more along jist after dark."

The silver star, set on silver circle, emblem of the great Texas Rangers, was pinned to Hatfield's shirt as he moved among the ranchers and cowboys of the district. Awe was written in their eyes, as they took in the great fighting man. Hank had told them of his exploits; had revealed his identity. The lies spread by Conroy's agents were forgotten when they learned who the tall man was.

Hatfield made his dispositions. He split the fighters into three riding bands, picking a leader for each. Ver-

non commanded one contingent, Ed Ewerts another and a cowman named Tills handled the third. Older men, and a bunch of cowboys, joined in a home guard which would stay at the Crow Foot to protect the women and children.

Nothing missed Hatfield's keen grey-green eyes. He checked guns and ammunition, saw to it that all were heavily armed. A hot meal was served, and then he gave his final commands.

They were braced for the battle.

CHAPTER XVII

The Great Fight

DEEP out of the Red Hills rode the tremendous array of killers, headed for the Crow Foot to murder and pillage. Their guns and accoutrements were shined and loaded. Their faces were blackened, eyes glinting in the faint moonlight.

At their head was Pablo Gonzales, the giant Mexican outlaw. There were close to two hundred men behind him. Half were border Texans and riff-raff who had worked for Dred Prescott, and they wore Stetsons or flat-crowned Nebraska hats, strapped about their stained faces. Every one carried two Colts or more, a knife, and a carbine or rifle bared and ready under his leg. The large Joe Green commanded them.

A bravo had charge of the Mexicans, bunched together, riding with the magnificent abandon of their race. High-peaked sombreros, velvet clothing or buckskin, tight-fitting about the legs, dark, red-gleaming black eyes dominating the stained faces, with bristling mustachios or long sideburns, marked these renegade Mexicans.

They rode, silent as ravening wolves. A slim Mexican scout swung up to report. He fell in beside Gonzales. "All is quiet, *Señor el Jefe,*" he whispered. "They sleep, save for the few guards."

"*Bueno*—good."

They were dropping down toward the Crow Foot, set near the Diablo River. There were two main trails to the big spread, which was surrounded by low foothills on three sides.

Gonzales gave a gruff order which was passed down the line. When they saw the dark bulk of the buildings ahead, the killers slowed, waiting for the command to close in. Scouts rode out to check the approach.

"Not a sound till we're in," growled Gonzales. "Then—kill!"

Braced and fortified by tequila and raw, burning whiskey, the murderers dug in their spurs and charged. As they swirled in close, a shrill whistle sounded. It was the signal for explosive action on the part of the waiting defenders. From barns and from the darkened windows of the great hacienda, rifles and shotguns opened up on the horde. The fusillade ripped into the bunched ranks.

"Spread out! Spread out!" shrieked Gonzales. "Fire!"

Jim Hatfield's keen eyes, watching the in-trails, had sighted them. His ears had caught the trembling of the earth under hundreds of hoofs. And he was ready.

The bandits whipped up their guns and poured lead in at the windows. Their swift horses carried them on at great speed as they split, riding in a semi-circle. Several had gone down in that first volley, and their dark figures lay on the plain. A second time the concerted fire came from the buildings.

"On—in there and kill!" bellowed Gonzales, and the lieutenants took up the cry.

They charged up to the walls of the house, seeking to drive the defenders from their points of vantage by filling the openings with whistling slugs.

Cursing men took bullets and died as their mounts bucked them out of the saddle. Pandemonium rose over the field of battle.

It seemed they would over-run the house; some were throwing themselves from their saddles and dashing

up to the wooden veranda, lighting oil-soaked brands which they carried to fire the place.

Hatfield shouted an order. He had thirty men hidden in an irrigation ditch, passed by the attackers on their way in. He leaped on Goldy, and spurred toward the rear of the black riders, his Colts roaring. His men followed, shooting into the backs of the outlaws. The diversion sent a thrill of fear through the bandits. Joe Green turned, with fifty killers, and rode straight toward the Ranger. Colts, rifles and shotguns, mingled in a roar of hate.

There was an audible clash as the two bands met. Hand-to-hand fighting ensued. The golden gelding, nostrils wide in the excitement, kept moving, the knee pressure of his great master guiding him ever closer and closer to the big form of Joe Green.

"Green!" roared Hatfield.

The deputy swung in his leather, pistol rising. Hatfield's Colt barked. The sub-chief shrieked in anguish, lost his grip, and fell off. His startled horse reared, and dragged Green under the sharp heels of the seething melee.

The death of their chief threw the outlaws into confusion. They began breaking away from Hatfield's fighting crew, picked young fellows from among the cowmen. Gonzales realized something was wrong back there for the heavy defense fire was riddling his ranks. His powerful voice rose over the din of the scrap, and a second bunch of ranchers burst into view from the other side of the ranch, led by the whooping, shooting Hank Vernon. Hatfield's reserves were coming up and the flank attack threw further consternation into the outlaw ranks.

Pablo Gonzales was a shrewd chief. He soon realized that this was not an impromptu defense but a skilfully executed, planned battle. The ardor of his killers had cooled considerably as they looked on their dead and writhing wounded, and heard and felt the tearing lead of retribution. Some were edging out to the wings, hunting a way to sneak off to safety.

"Away!" shouted Gonzales.

He himself led the flight. The panic seized upon the great gang with the speed of a prairie fire in dry grass. Outlaws stopped fighting, and jerked their reins, turning to make for the nearest gap out of the valley basin. Vernon's men cut them off from the farther exit.

As they headed toward the gap, however, red flames licked up to the sky. Dry grass and brush soaked with kerosene was set ablaze under the Ranger's orders. Ruby tongues of fire illuminated the trail close to the narrowing gap. And when the first of the outlaws hit this area, guns spat from the flanks, as Hatfield's third gang opened up.

Gonzales, seeing that escape was cut off in that direction lost all thought of fighting formation. His one idea was to flee himself. This emotion seized upon all the gunmen, and they became a number of individuals, splitting and riding in every direction.

EVERYWHERE they turned, cowmen and their followers were upon them. The gates were shut, and they were herded like so many panic-stricken steers into a mill.

Gonzales yanked his reins, and raced for the river. He bit at his mustache in fury, eyes rolling, swearing a blue streak. A tall rider on a golden gelding detached himself from the defenders of the Crow Foot and came at him with incredible speed flashing across the flats.

"Throw down, Gonzales!" bellowed Jim Hatfield.

The fire cast a bloody hue over the terrible scene. Groups of men fought hand-to-hand.

"Ne-vaire!" cursed Gonzales, shooting back at his foe.

Swiftly the Ranger drew up as the giant bandit made for the water. A bullet ventilated the peaked sombrero; Gonzales swerved and zigzagged.

"The Rangers want yuh, Gonzales! Stop!" Hatfield called.

Gonzales kept going, hoping to reach the stream, cross, and escape that way. But others, nearer to the

bank than their big leader, had the same idea. They were already starting to slide down into the water when rifles began barking from across the Diablo.

"I reckon I thought of everything. Let's hope so, anyways," muttered Hatfield as he rushed after Gonzales.

The killers were framed against the fire-glow, their blackened faces giving them away.

Pablo Gonzales pulled his great horse to a sliding stop, the animal rearing up as he changed direction. Escape was cut off. There was no way out. Hostile guns faced him from every direction.

He drew a deep breath into his barrel chest, rose high in his stirrups.

"Death to the Rangers!" he roared.

Gun up and belching, he charged straight at the oncoming Hatfield. The tall man heard the whipping lead close about him. His Stetson billowed off his black-haired head, the strap snapped by a close one. The pounding speed of the horses made aim difficult. His bullets drove near Gonzales but the giant charged on, and for an instant it seemed the two would clash head-on.

Hatfield tossed away an empty Colt, yanked a spare from his holster. His thumb was on the hammer and he could see the raging, flashing eyes of Pablo Gonzales. He felt a streak of pain through his thigh, and the sorrel gave a great bound forward, almost leaping upon the black mustang.

The Ranger's Colt roared point-blank, its slugs hitting in the big Mexican's middle. The bandit chief's gun banged its last tune but the muzzle was dropping, and the slug hit the dirt between the sorrel's flashing hoofs. Gonzales was down on his animal's neck, fingers gripping the long mane. An instant later the Mexican's beast swerved, and Gonzales' limp leg brushed Hatfield's.

Goldy skidded to a stop. Bullets from across the river were singing too close for comfort. The Ranger, warm blood trickling down his side, turned to follow the running mustang. Gonzales was still seated in his kak, but the mustang slowed and soon the sorrel was up alongside and Hatfield seized the reins and pulled him to a halt. Gonzales suddenly pitched out of his seat, one foot held by the tapped stirrup.

The Mexican was dead, drilled through the heart. Hatfield hauled his trapped foot clear of the stirrup, let his body fall to the ground, then went back into the fray.

CHAPTER XVIII

Cleanup

WHINING bullets from defender guns now swept the outlaws into swift submission. Cowmen were swarming everywhere, fired by the great spirit of the Texas Ranger. Scattered fighting continued, but it grew sporadic, weaker. With Green and Gonzales gone the renegades became

[*Turn page*]

a terror-stricken mob, and many threw down their weapons and begged for mercy.

Prisoners were taken and herded back to the barns to be held for the law. Those who chose to die rather than surrender, were quickly dispatched by blaring guns. Hatfield had plenty to do in the confused night. He wanted to capture some of Dred Prescott's men, those on the inside. Once the power of the gang's organization was smashed, he knew that the mental resistance would crumble as well and some members would talk to him, tell what they could in an effort to save themselves. They would have no further hope that Conroy and their chiefs could save them.

The last shots died off, echoes losing themselves in the great hills about the Crow Foot. Thanks to Jim Hatfield, the good had triumphed in the Sierra Roya.

Cowmen started around to pick up the injured, transporting them on improvised stretchers to the buildings for treatment. A few of the ranchers had taken lead, but so stunning had been Hatfield's counter-attack that the price was very low for what they had won.

In the big house, Hatfield paused to speak to Ban Bancroft, who was grinning widely at the victory of his friends.

"They're d o n e, Bancroft," the Ranger said, wiping the bloody sweat from his face. "Yuh oughtn't to have any more trouble with Gonzales' and Prescott's gangs."

"We're shore obliged, Ranger. Yuh done a wonderful job and I mean to tell McDowell so."

"There's one more little job I have to do," Hatfield drawled, "'fore I git congratulated."

"Huh! Yuh're plumb wore out and wounded, too. Clean up and let 'em fix yuh, Ranger. Then take a snooze."

Hatfield shook his head. Conroy loomed in his mind. Conroy whose restless, vicious mind had brought blood to the Red Hills, grief and death to the cowmen.

"Where yuh holdin' them two sidewinders from Conroy's ranch, the pair Hank and me captured the other day?" Hatfield inquired.

They were under lock and key in a strong-walled woodshed. Hatfield removed the padlock and stepped in. The two gunmen stood up, eyes gleaming in the dark of the enclosure. The battle had been entirely audible to them, but they had been unable to see what was going on.

However, Hatfield picked the one with the weaker face, set him upon a saddled horse, and began a quick tour of the field.

HE PAUSED at the spot where Pablo Gonzales lay, teeth clenched in death, ripped by Ranger slugs. Cassidy only blinked. Joe Green was doubled up not far away, and Cassidy gulped when he saw the deputy still wearing the sheriff's badge he had so abased. Others, whom Cassidy knew as important gunmen in the great bands, were wounded or dead. And when Cassidy saw the collection of prisoners, Texans and Mexicans, herded under the gun and heard the moans of the wounded, he began to bite his lip.

"What's the idea?" he snarled at last.

"I just wanted yuh to see for yoreself, Cassidy, that the jig's up. I don't really need yuh, but I'll give yuh a break if yuh help me."

"What is it?" demanded Cassidy suspiciously, but Hatfield could tell by the sudden gleam of hope in his dark eyes that the criminal meant to welsh . . .

The grey mists of dawn were still swirling as Michael Conroy caught the beat of hoofs swiftly approaching his little ranch.

Peering from a window he saw a rider come in, and relaxed as he recognized him.

"Cassidy!" he exclaimed, seizing his retainer's hand as the gunman entered the front door. "What's happened? Where are Green and Gonzales? They must have won, since you're free."

"They hit the Crow Foot and wiped

her out," cried Cassidy. "Dinny and me were held pris'ners there, Boss, but we never squealed. Here comes Green. He'll tell yuh all about it."

A big figure whirled up on a black horse, and Conroy saw the familiar yellow Stetson of Joe Green flash past the side window.

Cassidy was gripping the chief's hand, and Conroy turned to the door to meet Green.

He started, stepped back, face twitching as Hatfield, wearing the dead Green's hat, limped inside to confront him.

"'Mornin,' Conroy," drawled the Ranger.

Conroy understood at once that Cassidy had tricked him. The very presence of his arch-enemy, Jim Hatfield, told him that.

"Well?" he asked harshly. "What's the meaning of this, Hays? You're a law-breaker in these parts. I don't want anything to do with you."

"Git off yore horse, Conroy. The game's up. Ask Cassidy."

Cassidy licked his dry lips. "It's all over, Conroy. Yuh might as well kick in. Green's dead and so is Gonzales. The boys are arrested or on their backs, every man-jack of 'em. This Ranger's won the deal for fair."

"I don't know what you mean," Conroy said icily. "I have no connections with outlaws and gangs, except in a legal sense. Dred Prescott and others have been my clients, but I can hardly be prosecuted for that."

"Cassidy and me came on fast, ahead of the others," Hatfield told him. "I thought yuh might decide to light out, Conroy, if yuh knowed what happened. Yuh see, I figured out what yuh've been after in the Sierra Roya. Them pod augers I seen in yore shed and the black dust the night riders stained their faces with sort of cinched it. I almost lost the best horse a man ever had when he went into one of them pod-auger holes Prescott dug to check for yuh."

Conroy shrugged. His hatred for the tall officer who had beaten him physically and mentally overflowed from his eyes.

"Pod augers," Hatfield went on gently, as though giving a lecture on mineralogy, "are used for borin' cross-sections of strata to check the extent of certain deposits. Yuh taught Prescott and yore crew to use 'em. Horses turn 'em and fetch up a core. With the pod augers yuh made surveys of the hull region. I was pretty shore of what yuh were after here, although there were some puzzlin' aspects to it that had me, such as, why did yuh have earth scoops on Bancroft's range the day yuh killed Fred Bancroft—and why had yuh murdered Fred?"

"I've been tried for the supposed

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killing of Fred Bancroft," Conroy shrugged. "You can't expect me to answer again for it, no matter how many liars you dig up." He glared at Cassidy, who gulped and recoiled.

"Cassidy explained the scoops, and why yuh downed Fred. That was what I wanted to know. It wasn't important because I savvied what yuh were after, and how yuh went about it. However, I did wish to understand fully. When the Diablo washed over its banks it cost the ranchers a lot more'n a few drowned steers and extra work. The water carried away big sections of the stream's banks, and at one point, where Fred Prescott found yuh, it had lifted off the topsoil, revealing a good-sized section of stuff which yuh spotted. Yuh hustled back to yore ranch and brought out them scoops, to git it covered quick 'fore anybody else ran across it.

"But Fred happened along and saw the stuff. Yuh knowed a great deal about it, from yore former experiences, and figgered it was wuth a fortune. Yuh shot and killed Fred Bancroft to keep him from tellin' what he'd recognized. Yuh picked up the body and hustled over as Kansas Joe and Hank Vernon come up, to prevent them from seein' what yuh'd found on the river bank."

Conroy glared at the Ranger, jowls trembling with his rage and loathing.

"While yuh were in jail, waiting trial, Prescott and these fellows at yore ranch went all over the range, usin' them pod augers and checkin' the extent of it all, and reported it was even bigger'n yuh'd thought at first," Hatfield resumed. "Prescott and his gang begun working' on the ranchers, terrorizin' 'em, takin' over their land. It was wuth millions to yuh, to git the Sierra Roya."

"You'll have to prove this bilge in a court of law," Conroy said angrily.

"I admit yuh're mighty tricky. But I reckon if Texas can't hold yuh, then Pennsylvania can. Yuh're wanted back there, Conroy, near Pittsburgh." Hatfield was using the valuable information he had picked up when he had stationed himself in Conroy's house.

Red River Conroy glowered. "I'll fight extradition," he said. "That was a long time ago, Ranger. Witnesses have a way of dying."

"'Specially when they're against you, Conroy," said Hatfield drily.

AND yet he was none too sure of the horrible criminal who stood before him. He knew what Conroy was, what he was responsible for in the way of deaths of innocent people and in property damage to the citizens of Texas. Could he take his man into court and pin on Conroy the justice which should be meted out? Conroy had got away before, and he might do so again, through legal trickery. Hatfield recalled old Captain Bill McDowell's words in Austin:

"'Remember, the Rangers dispense justice. It kin come from a fancy court, jedge and blue-ribbon jury or it kin come outa the muzzle of this!'" And McDowell had patted his Colt.

Still, Hatfield could not shoot Conroy or any man in cold bood. The more he contemplated the lawyer, however, the less certain he felt of the aformentioned justice being successful in bringing Conroy to his just end. There were small things he might pin on Conroy, provided he could make them stick, but such a man had many devious tricks of avoiding conviction.

"Yeah," Hatfield drawled, "yuh had been in Pennsylvania, 'fore yuh run from the law to the Red River Country doin' crooked land deals. So yuh knowed all about coal, the coal that's as thick as so much clay under the dirt of the Red Hills! Coal—it's wuth more'n gold where it's plentiful, and it don't peter out the way a vein of gold does. Coal turns the wheels of industry and drives the trains. Yeah, that spur railroad to Whiteville would be valuable in shippin' the stuff to market. Great beds of bituminous coal that made yore mouth water! Yuh had the secret of it, the cowmen never guessin' what they rode over! The flood washed a big deposit clear, and yuh had to cover it quick, 'fore it was

seen and recognized. The pod augers checked how huge the coal beds are all through the Crow Foot and others' ranches yuh tried to take by force."

Coal! That was it. Hatfield had known it when he had seen the pod augers; and the black dust in the box at Skeleton Canyon, used by the riders to disguise themselves, had been coal dust!

Conroy was guilty of murder, every sort of dirty crime.

Yet—would justice catch up with him? The pride of the Rangers made it vital that Conroy pay for what he had done, although nothing one man could do would make up for the horror his criminal brain had brought upon the Red Hills.

Slowly Jim Hatfield unbuckled his heavy gun-belt, and tossed it behind him. Unarmed, he faced Michael Conroy. The lawyer had no gun in sight, and his small, feminine hands hung limply at his stout hips.

"It's man to man now, Conroy," Hatfield growled, scowling as he took a step toward the attorney. "I'm goin' to beat yore face to a pulp. Yuh'll learn what it is to pay for yore crimes, whether a court'll give yuh yore desserts or not. When I'm through, they'll be welcome to anything that's left, if they wanta try it."

Conroy's cheek twitched. A pallor spread under his skin.

"Keep—keep your hands off me. This is illegal," he cried, recoiling.

HATFIELD stalked forward. He was well away from his guns. Conroy's eyes blazed his deep hatred for his foe. Save for Cassidy, also a criminal, Conroy was alone in the place with the officer.

The set-up was too inviting to ignore. It was the kind of situation which Conroy would seize upon, and he did, as Hatfield figured he would. The small hand of the lawyer whipped inside his shirt and he pulled a .38-calibre snub-nosed revolver from the holster next to his hide and threw it up, a gloating look coming to his pudgy face.

"You fool! Do you think I'd let you get away with it?" bellowed Conroy as he pulled the trigger.

Hatfield dropped. He felt the bullet from Conroy's revolver burn through his Stetson and clip his hair. Then, before the murderous attorney's shot had finished echoing in the room, the Ranger coolly drew a spare pistol hidden under his vest and left armpit, and drilled Conroy between the eyes.

Conroy had been fooled, had fallen into the tempting trap baited by the Ranger. Hatfield had dispensed the justice demanded.

There was a surprised expression on Conroy's face. He let his arm drop, and the .38 fell from his hand to the floor. Then his entire body crumpled and he folded up in a heap at Hatfield's feet.

Cassidy gave a squeak of awe at Hatfield's unerring action.

"Yuh—yuh got him, Ranger," he gasped. "I never seen anything so quick!"

* * *

Captain Bill McDowell shook his star Ranger's hand heartily, as Hatfield reported for duty at Austin Headquarters.

"I got a wire here from Ban Bancroft," he roared. "It says, 'The Texas Rangers shore dispense justice! Hatfield's a gem!' That's the sorta message I like to read—and I reckon, as long as yuh ride, I will!"

"It was a matter of coal, Cap'n," reported Hatfield calmly. "This here Conroy sidewinder, the Whiteville lawyer, who killed Fred Bancroft, happened on some and bein' originally from the Pennsylvania coal districts, he knew how to check it. He was after them coal beds, tryin' to run the cowmen off the range so he could hawg it all. He got away with Fred Bancroft's murder, and he was mighty slippery to hold on to, even when I come up with him. I knew he was guilty of everything on the book but—" Hatfield broke off with a shrug.

McDowell's eyes narrowed. He stared at the imperturbable officer.

"Yuh remembered what I said of justice?" he asked softly. "The Rang-

ers have never been plentiful, Hatfield, and they've had to go it rough-and-ready at times, like McNelly and old Casuse. I hope yuh didn't leave no loophole for this here Conroy snake to crawl through."

"That was worryin' me, too, Cap'n. I figgered if I handed him over, he'd squirm out of it and start up again some other place. However, he run into a bullet. He let his feelin's git the better of his good sense."

McDowell heaved a sigh of relief. "I knowed yuh'd handle it right. Now looka here. Down in Pine County there's a bunch of folks complainin' of big cattle raids. . . .

Later, Jim Hatfield rode away from McDowell's office, the golden sorrel stepping along jauntily under him. Horse and rider were on their wild way once more to dispense Ranger justice throughout the far reaches of the Lone Star State.

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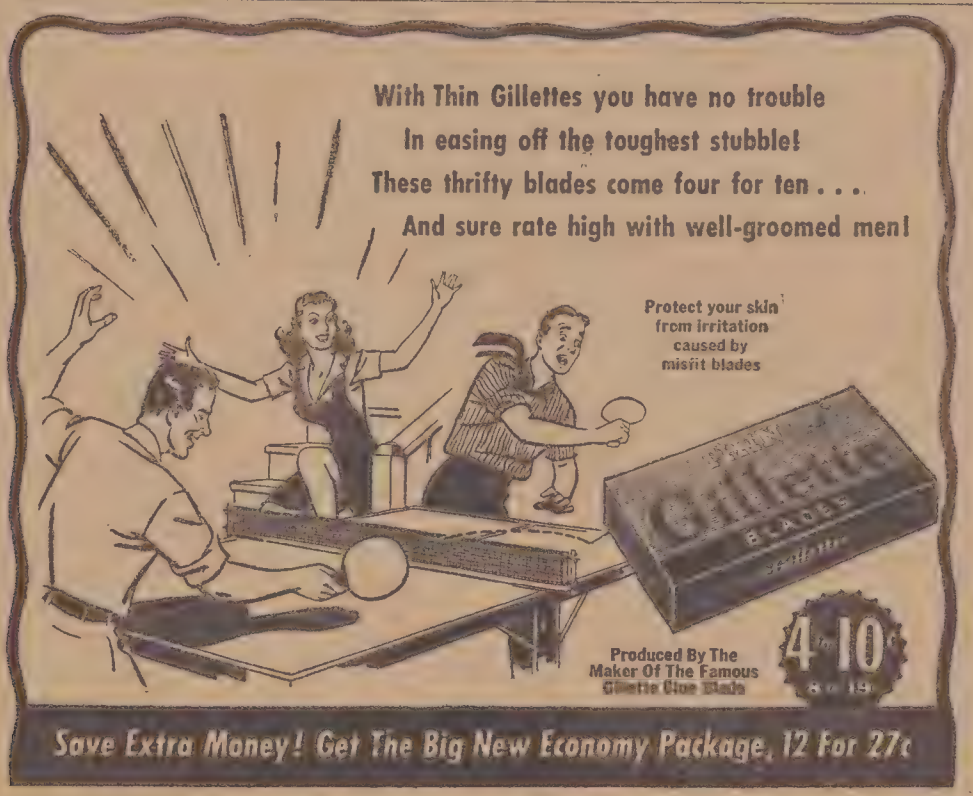
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RANCH PARDNERS

By
R. S. LERCH
Author of "Roamer of the Wilderness," etc.

Bung, caught off guard, fired—but not quick enough

Tick Billings Takes on a Foe with Whom He Is Not Acquainted Only to Find That a Range Cupid Can Be a Mean Rope-Thrower Against an Ordinary Ranny's Wiles!

"TICK" BILLINGS was glum, and there seemed no reason for it.

The beef round-up had brought together a larger trail herd than he and his partner, "Bung" Crandall had hoped for; and the drive northward had been uneventful. They had sold the cattle near the peak of a rising market, and were returning with six thousand in cash fastened inside of Bung's shirt. Yet little Tick was glum.

He glanced sourly at the bulge in his partner's shirt. Six thousand, enough to pay off the mortgage on their Crossed Arrow, the little ranch he and Bung had nursed through four tough years. There would be nearly three thousand left over, too. For what?

Tick mumbled disgustedly. He knew the answer to that—Thalia Purcell, the school teacher at Apache Bend. She was the reason Bung had insisted on burning the trail back to the home range.

Bung couldn't play around with 'em and leave 'em. He had to go and get serious. Oh, there wasn't anything definite yet. Bung wouldn't have the nerve to ask her to marry him when he was broke and in debt. Then, too, every unmarried man in town and on the surrounding range were on her trail.

Bung was worried mostly about the real estate shark, Northby Stringer. He had money, and he had a way with women.

"He should have," Tick had once grunted to Bung. "He's been married three times and has four kids."

It was Stringer who owned the mortgage on the Crossed Arrow. His business was buying mortgages from the bank and foreclosing the split minute they were over-due. He already owned four ranches. The Crossed Arrow, splitting the four, would, if he could acquire it, consolidate them all into one vast range.

Some of the gloom was dispersed when Tick thought that now they could block the fox-faced Stringer's pet scheme. But it returned quickly enough when he remembered that the money he had helped to earn probably would bring a woman in to take charge of the little ranchhouse where he and Bung had been so carelessly content.

"It ain't that I'm thinkin' of myself either," Tick told himself. "The one I'm bothered about is this big panther ridin' beside me. Yeah, reckon it would be swell for him, for a month mebbe—then he'd shore find out he was tied up for life. Then what! Somethin' shore has got to be done to save that gazabo, and looks like it was up to me. Pronto, too, for with the ranch secure and cash enough to carry on that locoed hombre plumb couldn't wait to swing his loop for the girl."

If he and Bung were broke, now, Tick thought—or if Bung believed they were. . . . Little Tick's eyes brightened as an idea began to take shape.

They reached a spot where a faint trail left the main road to Apache Bend and angled westward toward the hills. Bung Crandall reined in and glanced a little sheepishly at Tick.

"I've changed my mind, Bow-legs," he said. "Think I'll drop over to the ranch. Be in town later. You see Stringer and tell him to get that mortgage out. We'll take it up the first thing when I get in. And if yuh meet up with Thalia tell her I'm on my way. I want to be shore she's free this evening. I've got to see her."

"After yuh pay the mortgage and we're in the clear, huh?" Tick challenged.

Bung Crandall's ready grin appeared and a faint touch of color welled into his bronzed cheeks. "I'll tell 'em both what yuh say," Tick grunted. "Go on and get slicked up."

He rode on down the trail toward Apache Bend, afraid that his partner might catch the gleam of eagerness in his eyes he could not conceal and ask questions. Tick had a plan!

Riding toward town he assured himself that the results would be satisfactory. The one-year renewal of the mortgage wasn't up for two months. If Bung couldn't ask the teacher for two months that might be time enough to bring him to his senses, or time enough to give somebody else a chance to corral her. It was worth a try.

TICK knew he must be seen in Apache Bend, especially by Northby Stringer and Thalia Purcell. And he must do the work he planned in the dark where his partner could not recognize him.

He glanced to the west. The sun was less than an hour above the horizon. Buzzard Cut, the pass through the hills surrounding Apache Bend, would be the general location and that crack in the perpendicular west wall where the Cut closed in until it was scarcely twelve feet wide, would be exactly the right spot.

As he rode through the Cut he glanced sharply at the crack in the low rock wall. Yes, it was wide enough to conceal him, and there would be no moon tonight. He hoped Bung wouldn't be so foolish as to go for his gun.

Now that his plan was all set, though, some of the elation Tick felt at his own cleverness was dampened by a sneaking sensation of treachery. He consoled himself that it was for Bung Crandall's own salvation and that Bung would surely come to realize, finally, that the trick had saved him from a great mistake.

Tick set his lean jaw against the vague uneasiness.

"What I need," he decided, "is a drink. Mebbe more'n one."

Half an hour later he stabled his horse in a deserted shed across the alley from the rear of the War Bonnet Saloon. He could mount and ride away from there without anyone knowing he had left town.

Twilight had settled when he pushed through the bat-wing doors of the War Bonnet. He downed the first and second drinks neat and in quick succession. With the third in his hand, he slowly turned and glanced over the room. He nodded to the frock-coated gambler playing a game of solitaire at a corner table, then his gaze slid toward the two men at a table near the rear wall.

One was no taller than Tick himself, but he was older, and the lines in his lean, flint-hard face were harsh and his eyes were pale to the point of being colorless. He wore crossed cartridge belts and two guns, and something about the man indicated they were not for show. His partner was a trifle taller and a hundred pounds heavier. His jowls hung to his collar-bone and his little eyes were almost hidden in rolls of fat.

"Salty Bowers and Lard Potski," Tick muttered, his gray eyes narrowing slightly. "What are them loose-loops doin' in town? Sheriff must be away."

A light laugh drifting in from the street switched Tick's attention. He downed his drink fast, almost ran to the door, then with studied carelessness sauntered out onto the street.

Strolling past the hotel was a tall, thin middle-aged man, immaculately dressed. At first glance he appeared handsome. Another glance would have detected a faint tightness about the lean lips, a certain grim chill in the eyes, and of touch of ruthlessness in the predatory nose.

The girl walking with him was bright-eyed, smiling-lipped, and eager. Her soft brown hair framed a delicately tanned, piquant face.

Sauntering across the street toward them, Tick admitted he couldn't blame Bung Crandall for falling hard for Thalia Purcell. He'd have done it himself if he hadn't already been burnt too often.

He didn't blame Bung for worrying about Northby Stringer, either. Girls certainly did seem to like the real estate shark. The interest of this girl at his side also proved that. She was plenty absorbed with Stringer—didn't even seem to see Tick. Why should that make him mad, he wondered. It should have tickled him, with the plan he had in mind.

HE reached the other side of the street and halted in front of them, Stetson in hand.

"Why Tick!" Thalia exclaimed. "Back already? I thought it would take a month to make that long drive to the railroad. And you've been gone—how long is it?"

"Three weeks and six days, ma'am. At least my pardner said it was."

"Oh!" she said. "Is Mr. Crandall back too?"

"Humph!" thought Tick. "'Mr. Crandall,' huh? That big galoot *ought* to be brought to his senses. But I got a hunch she's just pullin' my bow-legs."

Tick grinned. "Reckon he'll burn leather gettin' here, Miss Purcell. I come straight to town, but he rode on over to the Crossed Arrow. He wanted me to tell yuh, if I saw yuh, that he'd like to speak to yuh tonight. Kind of important, I reckon."

The girl said, "Thanks," and Tick couldn't tell whether or not there was a touch of sarcasm in the tone. Also her faint flush might mean anger—or something else. He turned to Stringer, who had only murmured a slight recognition of Tick. A cold, calculating light was in the realtor's narrowed eyes, but Stringer was always calculating something.

"Bung wanted me to tell you, Stringer, that he'd like to see yuh in yore office this evening. He's getting things all squared up."

Stringer nodded. "Glad to hear he's been so lucky," he said, his voice as colorless as his smooth, untanned cheeks and thin lips.

Tick grinned again as he glanced across the street toward the War Bonnet.

"Excuse me, folks," he said, "but it's been a long, dusty trail and I'm mighty dry."

Thalia Purcell smiled and Northby Stringer parted his lips. Tick walked back across the dusty street, and turned to glance back when he reached the saloon. Stringer had disappeared and Thalia Purcell was hurrying down the street alone. Tick wondered at that as he pushed open the swing doors.

Twilight had been swallowed in darkness when Tick left the War Bonnet and wandered leisurely down the street. He glanced across to the windows on the floor above the general store. There was a light in them and the letters across the center one announced:

NORTHBY STRINGER
Real Estate, Mortgages, Loans

THE lean, erect form of Stringer passed back and forth across the window twice while Tick watched from the gloom between two empty buildings. Tick grinned. Evidently Stringer wasn't too pleased at the prospect of not being able to get his hands on the Crossed Arrow.

Then Tick drew in a sharp breath as the shadow of another man appeared against the blinds of the lighted window. The appearance was brief, but there was no mistaking that bulky form. As Tick worked his way down the narrow passage to the alley he wondered what Northby Stringer could want with "Lard" Potski. More ideas began to bubble in Tick's mind, and their ferment was not pleasant.

Tick knew it would take several hours for Bung to make the trip to town even with a fresh mount from the ranch. When Tick rode out of town, therefore, he knew he had plenty of time to reach Buzzard Cut before Bung Crandall got there. But those ideas that had come to him while watching Stringer's office were gnawing at him.

As soon as he was out of town he urged his mount into a swift canter. He angled away from the trail as he neared the line of hills through which the Cut wound, choosing a sharp gulch that did not penetrate past the center of the range.

He tethered his horse in a clump of aspens, then climbed the near rock wall. At the crown he moved forward to a point where the ridge fell away in a low, perpendicular wall. Carefully he worked northward along the edge of the cliff until he came to the crack he had examined on his way to town. Winding below him was the narrowest portion of the gorge.

He was surrounded by the hills and, especially at night, could not see more than a hundred yards in either direction. He listened intently, and heard nothing. Then he began to picture every square yard of Buzzard Cut, from its northern entrance to where it opened into the valley at whose lower end was the town of Apache Bend. And he decided that this crack in the narrowest part of the pass was the best possible spot for a one-man hold-up.

Not fifty yards from the crack was another spot where the canyon was wider, but where boulders dotted the floor and offered concealment. That would do for two men, but the place he had chosen was best for one. He lowered himself into the crack and began his descent. With his back pressed against one side and his feet and fingers searching for toe and hand holds in the opposite, he moved slowly down until, with a faint rattle and scrape, he dropped the last six feet to the gulch floor.

Again he crouched and listened. He thought he heard hoof-beats somewhere in the northern distance. Then he thought he heard them from the south. He grunted and drew up his neckerchief, knotting it tighter so that when it was in place it would conceal all of his face below the eyes.

He thought then of his partner's habit of doing the unexpected, and hoped Bung would be sensible and hand over the money peaceably. Tick sighed. He knew he was hoping for too much. Bung Crandall was not that

kind—not with all the money they both had in the world at stake. Tick knew what he would be up against. He'd probably be compelled to put a bullet in Bung's arm and maybe crack him over the head.

And then he completely forgot his scheme. There was no mistaking it this time. He *had* heard the pound of hoofs approaching from the south. And there were at least two horses. Suddenly the sound ceased.

Tick waited with increasing tension. He had been right! That wild guess he had made in Apache Bend was the truth. A *real* hold-up was about to be staged in Buzzard Cut, and Tick guessed the spot selected was that boulder-strewn one farther down the gorge.

He stepped out of the niche and removed his spurs. Then, close to the wall of the Cut, he crept silently forward. Little sounds came to him—the cry of a night bird, the rattle of a pebble, and once the low sound of a human voice.

The gorge widened. Farther on the walls converged to a second, narrow passage. Dimly, he could see boulders dotting the floor.

He circled until he was near the center of the curve in the wall, then crouched low and waited, listening and watching.

Twice he thought he detected movement in the gray oblong that was the southern passage of the gorge. Again he heard little sounds that might be the movement of some animal, or of a man.

Quite suddenly what looked like a big boulder appeared where he had seen nothing a moment before. It moved, then merged with a huge rock close to the trail down the center of the oval. From farther down the trail came a low, thin whistle. It was answered from the vicinity of the rock in front of Tick.

Other distant sounds became clearer then—the sounds of a horse cantering along the pass from the north. There was a slight movement behind the rock, as though a man had turned his head. Then the whistle, two short, sharp blasts, came from the black shadow beside the boulder and again was answered from farther down the gulch.

Tick rose silently, his six-gun in his hand. He waited, his gloom-accustomed eyes centered on the man in the shelter of the rock. The hoof-beats became sharp and hard and loud as the approaching rider left the grassy floor of the valley and pounded along the rock botton of the gorge.

The rider appeared suddenly. He loomed large, like a black specter charging down the gorge. He passed the boulder in front of Tick and the man behind that boulder stood up and turned.

"Drop it, Lard!" Tick yelled shrilly. Then, "Look out ahead, Bung!"

His ringing call reverberated from the rock walls. He heard Bung fire but, caught off guard—was not quick enough.

THEN, at Tick's yell, there was a curse, then the flash of six-gun fire spitting toward him. Tick fired twice into the center of the blob of black. Another curse, a sobbing one, ended in the soft thud of a pulpy body collapsing to the floor of the gorge. Farther down there were more flashes and a riderless horse racing southward, spurred by the reverberations of gun-fire.

Tick ran forward, zigzagging and at a crouch. He headed for the man stretched motionless in the trail. Another man appeared, a short, thin man who moved quickly and knelt beside the fallen man.

"Try me, Bowers!" Tick yelled, then jerked to a halt less than ten yards away.

The kneeling man stiffened. Even in the pale light of the stars Tick could distinguish the harsh lines of the angular face and knew that those pale, colorless eyes were seeking him.

"Try me!" Tick repeated. "Yuh've been wantin' to for a long time, Salty Bowers, but yuh didn't have the nerve. Got the nerve now, or will yuh wait to stretch hemp?"

Then the gunman moved, a swift, twisting leap to one side. Two guns —those of Tick, and of "Salty" Bow-

ers—spat fire and lead at each other through the darkness. Something nipped at Tick's shirt collar and he thumbed the hammer once more. More muzzle flashes in front of him, but this time they were directed at the ground.

Tick went forward cautiously, ready to fire the last shell in his six-gun. He rolled the gunman over with the toe of his boot and saw the trickle of blood down the leathery cheek from a hole near the center of the forehead.

Then Tick jumped for the fallen rider. There was no sound from the man. Tick sheathed his gun and with careful hands turned the man on his back. He saw the widening stain on the right side of the shirt and reached forward, feeling for the heart action. It was there—faintly.

From somewhere in the dark behind him came a low moaning. Tick hesitated a second, then turned and ran toward the sound. Lard Potski was no longer crouching behind his boulder. He was lying with his back to it, and both of his fat hands were pressed against his bulging stomach. His face was a pasty, white moon out of which stared two, terror-filled eyes. Almost in front of him lay his six-gun. Tick picked it up and turned away. Potski cried out, but Tick walked on without looking back.

Kneeling beside his partner, he now struck a match. Bung Crandall's eyes were closed. On his forehead a lump half the size of a hen's egg showed why he was unconscious.

"Dove out of saddle after firing the first shot—and lit on his head," Tick muttered, then switched the match toward the wound.

He saw the hole in the shirt, high on the chest. The match dropped from his scorched fingers and went out. He carefully unbuttoned the shirt, then lit another match. The lead, appearing to have ranged upward had, Tick hoped, missed the lungs.

He hurried down the gorge to the end of the perpendicular walls. When he ran back his hands were full of dry wood. When he finally arose from beside the little fire he had built a cloth plug and a bandage with which he closed the open bullet hole in his partner, Bung Crandall's chest.

For a moment Tick looked silently down at the blood-stained sheaf of currency in his hand. One corner of the bundle had been clipped by the bullet. Finally he thrust them into his levis' pocket and walked back to the dying Potski. There were questions he wanted Lard to answer.

Lard Potski's groans were feeble now. He stared up at Tick, eyes glazed with pain. Tick brought out the bundle of currency and held it before Potski's eyes.

"Yuh was to get this, and also to make a kill?" he demanded.

Something in the bitter glance and the unmoving, thin line of the little rancher's lips brought deadly fear to the fat outlaw's eyes.

HE whispered an almost inaudible, "Yes."

"Yuh was doin' it for yoreselves?" pursued Tick.

This time the pulpy lips pursed in a silent, "No." The outlaw was scarcely breathing.

"Orders from Northby Stringer, eh?" snapped Tick. "He brought you two beauties to town and kept yuh there to stop me and Bung in case we got back in time to save our ranch?"

But there was no answer. Lard Potski had quit breathing.

A faint sound, like a feeble cry, brought Tick to his feet and sent him at a stilted, bow-legged run back toward his partner. Bung was sitting up, trying to get to his feet. Tick Billings caught him by the shoulders, and eased him back.

"Yuh danged fool!" he snapped. "Yuh want to bleed to death? Lie quiet now, and let me plug yuh up again."

"Tick—our stake—it's gone! Our mortgage money—all my hopes for—" The young giant stared up at his little partner, unable to frame words to express the stark tragedy that showed in his eyes.

Tick looked down, unmoving, his lean features hard and expressionless. Here was his chance. What he had set out to do himself had been accomplished for him. All he needed to

say was that in town he had been suspicious of Potski and Salty Bowers and some other man he didn't know, that he had followed and mixed in the fight, and that Potski and Bowers had been killed, but that the other man had got away with the money, even though he'd been wounded.

Later, when Northby Stringer or someone else persuaded Thalia Purcell to marry him, and before the due date on their note to Stringer, Tick could search Buzzard Cut and pretend to find the money where the other man had hidden it.

But Tick did nothing of the kind. Slowly he drew out the bundle of currency and held it before his partner's eyes.

"They didn't get it, Bung. The ranch and yore future happiness are safe." He added to himself, "I hope."

Relief flamed in Bung Crandall's eyes, but almost immediately worry filmed them.

"Bow-legs, what time is it?"

There was a strained urgency in the whisper that automatically sent Tick digging for the big silver watch fastened on the end of a rawhide thong tied to his belt loop. Tick struck a match and glanced at the watch.

"Ten minutes to midnight. Why?"

Bung groaned. "Too late. Wanted to appear before Stringer at the last minute before midnight, but I cut it too fine. And now you can't make it! Today is the due date on that note. He won't renew. He wants our land too much for that."

"Yuh're crazy!" Tick snapped. "We got two months yet."

"No," Bung whispered. "I staked everything on the beef round-up. Two more months wouldn'ta saved us, so I got the mortgage extended last time for just ten months instead of a year—to save interest. Now yuh know why I was—in hurry—to get back. But—too late. Pard, all my—fault." And Bung Crandall closed his eyes.

Tick passed a hand over his forehead and the hand came away wet.

"I reckon not," he said quietly then. "I'm takin' a little ride into town. You lie still here, and I'll send the doc out to pick yuh up. You try to ride and yuh'll bleed all over the county."

"What yuh goin' to do—and how'd yuh come to be here?" Bung murmured without opening his eyes.

"Never mind what I'm goin' to do. I come to be here because I didn't like the actions of Lard Potski and Salty Bowers. Don't worry, and lie still. Got me?"

A TRACE of a grin appeared on Crandall's lips. "I won't worry. I'll lie still. And I've got you—thank God."

Tick turned quickly away and there was something strained about the curse he muttered.

He found Bung's pony cropping bunch grass where the canyon walls sloped back to form wooded ridges. The animal was fresher than his own, but when it was reined to a halt in front of the doctor's little cottage at the edge of Apache Bend it was covered with sweat and lather.

Tick helped the doctor harness his team, then mounted and rode toward the center of the town. He halted before another small cottage. There was a light in the front window. He dismounted and walked up to the porch. The door opened as he went up the steps and a faint and disappointed, "Oh," was his greeting. His hat was in his hand as he said coolly:

"I come to tell yuh, Miss Thalia, that Bung won't be able to keep his meetin' with yuh tonight. He's had a slight accident. Besides, we lost our ranch. And all the cash we'd saved is gone, too."

The girl gasped, her eyes widened and her hand crept automatically up to press against her heart.

"An accident!" she whispered. "Where—is—he?"

"He's lying on the ground in Buzzard Cut with a chunk of lead in him and Doc Peters is half-way there by now."

Before Tick had finished explaining the girl had run past him, down the steps and around the house toward the stable.

"Don't wait for me!" she flung back.

"Well, I'll be—" Tick whispered,

staring. "And she didn't even mention our bein' broke. Mebbe I been mistook."

He gave a savage hitch at his gun-belt. "But not about everything," he added, as he swung around and walked quickly to his tired pony.

There was still a light in the office of Northby Stringer. Tick mounted the stairs, opened the door without knocking, and slammed it shut behind him. Stringer swung around in his swivel chair to face Tick Billings. His eyes widened for a split second, then grew cold, emotionless and wary. He slid open a table drawer. His right hand rested on the table edge, just above the open drawer.

"Get out the papers yuh hold on the Crossed Arrow, Stringer," Tick ordered drily. "I've come to pick them up."

The real estate man gave him what he might have thought was a smile. His glance swiveled briefly toward the wall clock.

"Sorry, Billings," he drawled. "It's one o'clock. The note is a full hour over-due. I regret also that I'll be unable to renew the mortgage, that I'm compelled to foreclose. But money is tight just now and I must protect myself. Unfortunate, also, that there is as yet no redemption period in this state. However, I'll give you ample time to move your stock, unless you desire to sell what is left. I'll give you as good a price as anybody."

Tick grinned this time, and there was something wolfish in it.

"I'm goin' to do something I never thought I could," he said, his grin broadening. "I'm goin' to pay yuh a compliment. Yuh must have snow-slush flowin' through yore veins. Yuh're the coolest blood-sucker I've ever seen in my life. Take a look at this, and learn the answer to the questions yuh're dyin' to ask."

He pulled the package of bloody currency from his pocket and slapped it down on the table. Stringer stared at it. His lips became bloodless, but he did not speak.

"Blood," Tick rapped. "My pardner's blood, let out by Salty Bowers' lead. But it didn't do no good. I happened to see Lard Potski outlined against yore window curtain, so I took a little ride up Buzzard Cut way before they got there. They're both dead, Stringer. Potski didn't die right away. He lived long enough to talk."

Not a muscle in Northby Stringer's lean face moved, but a shadow of fear involuntarily washed across his gray eyes. For a long moment silence hung in the dead air of the office. Then Stringer spoke with forced calm.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Billings. Whatever Potski said that might implicate me was a lie, of course. He's dead, you say?"

TICK realized his error. Potski could not repeat his testimony. But the tight grin of the bow-legged little cowman still held.

"That being disposed of," Stringer went on, "there still remains the fact that you are too late to save your ranch. And be careful. Violence won't get you anything. I have a gun here, and—"

He didn't finish. Without the slightest warning, Tick's right hand twitched. There was a resounding smash against the table-top as the little man slammed down the barrel of his gun, denting the wood. The muzzle centered Northby Stringer just below the short-ribs. Stringer's hand leaped away, revealing the pearl handle of a little .32 in the drawer. Tick's voice was almost a purr.

"I'm makin' no bargain with yuh, Stringer. If Bung Crandall dies, so do you. That's not a threat—it's a sworn promise. What's killin' him now, more than the hole in his chest, is the idea that he's lost our ranch. If I can show him a paid-up mortgage, he'll have a fighting chance. All Bung ever needed for anything was a fighting chance. Yuh've got the answer, Stringer. What is it?"

Northby Stringer stared into the eyes of the little man. Tick Billings' grin was gone now, and beneath its weathered bronze his face was as pale as that of the real estate man. There was likewise a little knot of muscle at his jaw hinges that twitched.

For a second it seemed to fascinate Northby Stringer. It told of the little man's hair-trigger tension. It told of terrible forces seething within him, ready to explode at the slightest provocation.

Northby Stringer turned slowly around to his roll-topped desk and picked up the papers he had been examining. . . .

* * * *

TICK BILLINGS quietly eased open the door of the one-room hospital of Apache Bend's doctor. Bung was lying in bed staring up at the flushed, pretty face of the girl bending above him.

"But, honey," he was murmuring, "I haven't a home any more. Mebbe Tick and me can start up some place else with what we've got, but it'll take every cent and more and be another long, hard, uphill pull. I can't ask yuh—"

"Bung Crandall," Thalia Purcell said firmly, "when I love a man I don't care whether or not he has a dime. You're such a goose—have been for a year."

"But anyway," Bung began stubbornly, "I won't take yuh into—"

"If I know that loyal, bow-legged, little partner of yours, bless him, you won't have to," the girl interrupted again. "I'm banking on Tick Billings. He looked like an avenging angel when he stopped to tell me what had happened."

"And I thought I was gettin' what that ranny needed to make him want to live," Tick murmured wonderingly to himself.

Then he pushed the door fully open and walked into the room.

"Who says I'm an avengin' angel?" he demanded. "Yuh see any wings on me?"

He advanced with a sheaf of papers in his hand and spoke directly to his partner.

"Me, I'm just a young puncher with a half interest in the best ranch north of the Red River. You own the other half, gazabo."

He tossed the papers on the bed.

"But from th' looks of things it won't be a undivided half for long," he commented. "Well, I'm glad of it. I been eatin' yore bum cookin' till my innards's all corroded. Howdy, Miss Thalia. Can you cook?"

The girl arose and faced him, her eyes shining.

"I said you're an angel, Tick, and I meant it. And—and I can cook. Depend on that."

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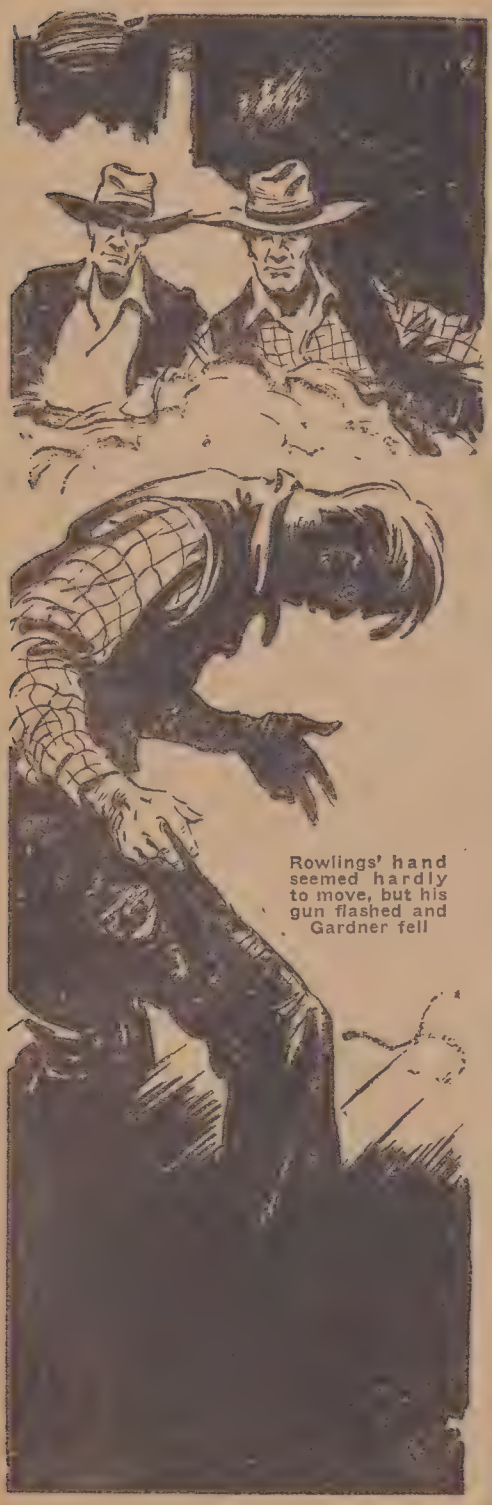

By RALPH BERARD

Author of "Lynch Law for Killers," "A Traitor Dies," etc.

When the Lone Sky Trail Looms Near, Old Brant Rowlings Finds that the Way of Transgressing Owlhooters Is Plenty Hard!

BRANT ROWLINGS urged his great black stallion on toward the hills desperately. It was a nip and tuck chase. He kept his head low on the beast's neck. For an hour the whine of occasional bullets had come from the doggedly determined five men of the posse behind him. Brant Rowlings was a prize for any sheriff to bag—dead or alive.

There had been no shots now for several minutes. Rowlings permitted himself a quick grin.

His superior mount and horsemanship were beginning to tell. They always did.

At the mouth of Little Rock Canyon he drew up his stallion, rose in the stirrups and turned to look back. The posse was far behind now, the horses' figures dim in the haze of late afternoon.

Rowlings had again reached the entrance to the twisted maze of ravines and narrow defiles which led to the hide-away of his outlaw band.

He let the stallion amble on a few steps, then drew its head around eastward and spurred the high-strung beast up the steep bluff that would enable him to drop into Gopher Ravine. From there he could let the horse choose its own course toward the ridge. Then, he figured, he would be safe.

Brant Rowlings had time now to lift his broad-brimmed hat to wipe sweat from his cheeks and neck. He

came to a tiny pool that the thin summer trickle of Gopher Creek still fed. He gave the stallion its head and slid down beside it, to lie on his stomach and drink deeply of the clear cool water.

Rowlings saw his face reflected there in the water and the nervous grin of excitement was gone. Too late, he was realizing it was not a bad face. The eyes were clear, the features regular, the head well-shaped. But the hair was streaked with gray. He was fifty.

Brant Rowlings long regarded his features reflected there in the water. The stallion slobbered, disturbed the smooth clearness of the pool and distorted the image. Rowlings stood up, adjusted the ivory-handled guns in the broad belt at his waist. A new determination was building up in him, a new worthwhileness in living. He remounted the stallion and pulled around toward the ridge.

YES, his hair was streaked with gray. For himself it was too late. Thirty years on the owlhoot had hardened his muscles, creased deep the lines in his face.

His powerful body carried two bullets from the Law. Small white scars showed where two more had gone through him.

Rowlings did not deceive himself. He was getting old. Every sheriff in the country wanted him. They would always be on the prod after him. In the end they would get him.

But the others were younger, still worth saving. An outlaw, when he started young, didn't realize. Maybe sometimes he didn't care. Rowlings knew it was that way with his own boys.

They looked to him for leadership. And he had led them wrong.

He came out on the ridge. His firm hand guided the horse among the dwarfed trees toward the granite ledge from which he could look back toward the valley. As he moved into the open the hot fire of a bullet burned into his hip. A rifle's report, muffled by distance, drifted up from the twisted country below. A puff of smoke blossomed a mile away.

Involuntarily Rowlings jerked back the stallion. He clutched at the saddle-horn, tried to fight off the pain. He could feel the crunch of splintered bones. A fire leaped up under his ribs. It was difficult to stay in the saddle.

Then he lay forward on the faithful beast's neck, cursing the fateful luck that had made a shot at such a distance find its mark.

The bullet, he knew, was well spent. But he also knew that the wound was a bad one.

Waves of dizziness swept him. It taxed his strength to guide the horse through the crazy, twisted debris of cross-cutting valleys that led toward his camp and possible safety.

Brant Rowlings was not sure he would live. Nausea came over him. He retched and was sick. But he kept going on. He had to go on, had to make it to camp.

Darkness came, and with it a measure of cooling comfort. His saddle was wet now, slippery and red. His eyes burned. At each movement of the horse he seemed to lapse into a brief spell of unconsciousness.

But finally there came an orange-red star of hope to guide him. Rowlings blinked, to be sure. Then he knew it was the campfire of his men. He had reached the almost impenetrable granite pass where the band made headquarters. There, on the hard ground near the fire, he let himself slide from the stallion. His body lay still.

Five men gathered quickly around him.

A six-foot Negro, with a big six-gun hanging loose from his hip, its shiny metal reflecting the red glow from the campfire, knelt beside him.

"You-all ain't goin' to die, is yuh?" the excited colored man exclaimed.

A chunky man of perhaps thirty stepped closer. He prodded Brant Rowlings' body with the toe of his heavy riding boot.

"Never mind, Sam," he commanded the Negro roughly. "Looks like he's finished."

Sam Washington Jones looked up. The whites of his eyes rolled danger-

ously. His tone, his speech were slow, drawling threats.

"Yuh keep yuh're dirty boots off'n Massa Brant," he warned. "It take more'n one bullet hole to kill dis man. Reckon yuh know dat, Joe Gardner."

Joe Gardner's massive shoulders stiffened. His dark eyes cast about quickly to observe the reaction of the four other outlaws. He met expressions that were hard to read. The faces of those men told him nothing, nothing except that each was intent and serious, that each man was thinking his own thoughts. They wanted to know how badly their leader was hit.

Brant Rowlings was weak and faint. He was in terrible pain. But he was not unconscious. He heard what was said. Even in his suffering his teeth set hard on his lip. The resolution of his will made him turn over. He struggled to sit up. His hand groped toward his gun.

"Joe," he challenged, "yuh been tryin' to turn the men agin me a long time. Now that I'm bad hit, yuh're skunk enough to take advantage. Go for yore cutter while I'm alive and let's get it settled!"

But Brant Rowlings' weapon wavered in his stiffening fingers. He dropped, unconscious.

Slowly, deliberately, Joe Gardner took out his gun. He started to point it down at the still form on the ground. But the Negro leaped at him. The heavy fist of Frank Bret, another outlaw, came up from behind. Jim Clarsen, still another, grabbed the wrist that held the weapon. The other two outlaws joined to help.

"We're maybe a tough bunch," the well-educated little Ferdinand Crosby said evenly as he yanked Gardner's feet from under him, "but we don't shoot men when they're down."

Clark Tadborn emphasized the same sentiment with a sharp nudge of his sharp-pointed shoe. . . .

It was ten days before Brant Rowlings came out of his fever. Then he was only strong enough for dim, uncertain spells of consciousness. Always, when his mind functioned normally for a few minutes, the faithful Sam was there beside him. Sam brought water, and food. He bathed Rowlings' forehead, and went almost into a delirium of joy the first time Rowlings was able to open his eyes and speak coherently.

"Yuh goin' to be all right now, shore 'nuff!" The Negro heaved a sigh of relief as loud as a Dodge City cattle train blowing off steam. "Man, that shore a load off my mind."

"And a weight off yore feet too, I reckon," Rowlings said.

"Now I get me some sleep," the Negro agreed.

A few days later, when Brant was stronger, able to sit in the comfortable warm sun in front of the granite cliff, Sam said with deep exaggerated wrinkles of worry creasing his shiny black forehead:

"Dat ungrateful hound dog, Joe Gardner, don't wish yuh no good, Boss. He's stirrin' the men to think yuh all through. Yuh never ride no more, he say. Him boss now, he tell 'em."

Brant Rowlings stretched out his right leg carefully, grimaced at the pain and stiffness.

"He's mebbe right, Sam, about me not ridin'. Lookee there." The outlaw chief pointed at his two bare feet stretched out before him. "One's an inch or two shorter'n the other. Reckon it'll always be that way."

Sam looked at the feet, and blinked several times.

"Pshaw, Boss! Yuh a better man 'an that mule-skinner if yuh only got one foot."

Rowlings smiled. "Reckon yuh're behind me strong, Sam. But Gardner's right in a way. There's a shake-up comin'. I can't be head of the band any more."

TWO days later, just at dusk, little Ferdinand Crosby rode into the camp. Beside him rode a young puncher on a paint cowpony.

"I've brought in a new recruit," the dapper little outlaw announced. "He's a man with an education like myself. He speaks English so that any steer west of the Pecos could understand him. And he wants to join up."

Brant Rowlings sat on a flat stone near the fire, half leaning on an improvised cane that Sam had cut.

"Bring him in closer, Ferdi," he invited. "We'll look him over."

The puncher was young. Not over eighteen or twenty, Brant thought. He was a well-built young fellow with sky-blue eyes and a good square chin. He stepped forward slowly, seemed a little abashed. Then he glanced at Rowlings' crutch and his eyes opened wider.

"Get hurt?" he inquired a bit anxiously.

"Shot," Brant Rowlings said briefly. "Crippled for life."

The outlaw chief glanced at the men who were sitting around. He caught the surly challenging glint in Joe Gardner's eyes. The two glared at each other a moment. Gardner took a step forward.

"I'll talk to the kid," he announced. "Yuh're about finished anyhow. Yuh can't ride any more."

Brant Rowlings did not move. But his eyes hardened. His lips set firmly. He glanced about at his men, read the undecided doubt in their eyes.

"I'll do the talkin'," he said.

There was a moment of silence, heavy, sullen silence.

"The boss'll do the talking," Frank Bret said.

"We'll listen to Brant," Clark Tadborn said.

Ferdi shrugged disinterestedly. Jim Clarson shook his head in a slow negative.

Joe Gardner hesitated, looked about the little circle of men, finally met the white eye-balled threat of Sam Washington Jones. He moved back resignedly and leaned against a boulder.

"What's yore name?" Brant Rowlings asked the young puncher. "What makes yuh want to go on the owlhoot?"

"Yuh can call me Mike," the puncher said. He wiped the palms of his hands nervously along his gun belt. "Heard lots about Brant Rowlings. I've heard about the gun battles yuh been in, about all the things yuh've done."

"How I've outwitted the law at every turn, eh?" the outlaw leader suggested.

"Yeah, and how yuh've got wet beef to market and made a heap of coin. Now I'm in a bad fix. I shot a hombre last night in Jasper Springs. We was gamblin' and he cheated, and so—"

"Yuh don't need to tell us," Rowlings said coldly. "We don't care why yuh killed him. We never care. We shoot sheriffs and deputies just because they do their duty, because they try and keep the country honest."

The young fellow stared. He looked startled, mystified.

Joe Gardner stepped forward angrily.

"Listen here, Brant," he intoned. "Yuh're not gettin 'away with this. Just because yuh're through and turnin' soft, yuh needn't think yuh're goin' to break up the bunch. I'm next in line to take charge and yuh know it. This ranny looks like good material to me. I want him to have a chance."

Rowlings did not answer Gardner. He spoke to the young cowboy who called himself Mike.

"This man"—he pointed toward Gardner—"says he wants yuh to have a chance. So do I, son. I want yuh to have a chance to decide for yoreself. I've been ridin' the owlhoot twenty-eight years. I have two doses of lead in my body. Three holes. I'm a cripple now—one leg is shorter'n the other. I killed a man too, to begin with. There's been others since. Plenty. I don't know who they were. They wore stars. That's the only wrong they done. They fought for the law. Only I was faster.

"I coulda gone back, son, like you can, and told the truth. If yuh killed a man for cheatin' at cards, go back and face it out. It's yore best bet. Yuh'll have the law on yore side. In the long run the law'll win out."

GARDNER kept moving forward. His dark eyes turned cold. The dim last light of day was giving way to the flickering red glow of the bandit's fire.

"Yuh're goin' to listen to me, Brant," he commanded.

He had stopped out in front now. He stood with his legs a little apart, facing Brant Rowlings across the small level space in front of the fire.

"I've rode with yuh for five years." Gardner's tone was low, threatening, growlingly sarcastic. "I'm the one to take charge when you drop out. Yuh're gettin' too old anyhow. Because yuh're quittin' is no reason I should lose the chance I been workin' for of makin' a clean-up."

Brant Rowlings stood up. He held the improvised crutch with his right hand, slightly leaning upon it. His voice, when he answered Gardner, was soft, almost mellow with patient understanding.

"I didn't ask yuh to join up," he said. "When yuh first come I talked to yuh just like I'm talkin' to Mike here." He shook his head as if with the futility of repeating it. "I talked to all the boys pretty much the same when they joined. Each one but you, Gardner, listened. These boys appreciated what I told 'em. The only reason any one of 'em stayed was because a noose was waitin' for him behind the star of the law.

"These other boys"—Rowlings swept his arm slowly to include them all—"Sam here killed a white man down South for beatin' him nearly to death with a blacksnake whip. The welts was still on his body when he come and asked me to join up. A lynchin' party waited for him back where he came from—just because he was a colored man. So I let him stay.

"Bret got in bad company. He killed a man in a bank holdup. That's how he started. Clarson rode with Billy the Kid in New Mexico. They thought they were fightin' on the side of the law. But the law got confused. And they couldn't go back.

"Ferdi was a bank teller. He was smart, too smart. He thought he could get into the vault without any trouble. But a guard got in his way and he shot him. Then he come here. Tadburn fought on the losin' side of a range war. The winners put in a sheriff that was out to get him. That's why he joined up with my bunch."

Brant Rowlings straightened as much as he could. One shoulder drooped quite a bit. His gun-belt sagged on that side. He brought his hand up casually, touched the butt of his gun, as if to feel for sure just where it was. He still leaned on the crutch.

Joe Gardner tensed. His hand came up, hovered near his right gun butt. The tone of Rowlings' voice, the deathlike stillness, the close, oppressive feel of the air told the men who watched that a moment of action had come.

Rowlings seemed almost unbelievably at ease, relaxed and casual. His eyes held Gardner's like something caught in a vise.

"You, Joe," he said in an almost fatherly tone, "come with us just because yuh was bad. Yuh didn't have any reason 'cept yuh wanted to fight. Yuh wanted easy blood money. Yuh claimed yuh'd been in a fair fight in Cattle Center. Rumor said yuh'd shot a faro dealer in the back. I checked on that, Joe. The evidence was bad, awful bad. Yuh knifed a Chinese restaurant-owner in Dodge City, too, Joe. Yore only reason was to get what the poor heathen had in his till. Yuh shot a deputy in the back since yuh been here. Half a dozen times yuh've tried to pick a gun-fight with me. Yuh won't be satisfied till yuh're boss. Then yuh'll cheat the rest of the boys outa their share."

THE men knew what was going to happen. They moved quietly back. Frank Bret stood on the far side of the fire. Jim Clarson leaned against the sheer granite wall of the cliff, his elbow against it and his fingers idly caressing the butt of his sixgun.

Little Ferdinand Crosby stood behind his horse on a boulder, his elbows resting on the horse's shoulder, its body part way hidden in shadow. Carl Tadburn stood more in the open. But he shifted enough to get out of line of their fire.

The young cowboy who called himself Mike had shrunk back in the darkness. Only the Negro, Sam, stood

still. He was within three feet of Brant Rowlings. As Rowlings spoke Sam's white teeth had seemed to shine more and more in the gathering gloom. It could have been thought he was grinning.

Two or three minutes passed in that sort of silence.

"Don't hold off, 'cause I'm a cripple," Brant Rowlings finally said quietly. "This is the chance yuh always wanted, Gardner. Yuh can draw when yuh're ready."

It was over quickly then. Gardner's face became hideous, his slitted eyes cold and cruel. His chin protruded and his whole body tensed and slightly crouched. He was like a rattler ready to spring. His hand fell like the flashing of light and his gun came up —part way.

Brant Rowlings had hardly seemed to move at all. The crutch was balancing on end when he fired and it fell stiffly down just as Gardener's body did. Rowlings balanced himself by letting down the leg that was shorter than the other. He broke his gun, raised it and blew smoke from the barrel.

Sam stooped and picked up the crutch, handed it back to Rowlings just as if that was why he had been standing there waiting.

"Yuh should of done that a long time ago, Boss," he said.

The young fellow, Mike, came up out of the shadows. He was leading his horse and his face was pale. He glanced down a second at the dead man and stood perfectly still. Then he said to Rowlings:

"Do yuh mind if I ride?"

"I want yuh to ride, son," Brant Rowlings said. "Go back and face whatever charge is against yuh. Don't ever turn agin' the law. It'd be better to let it hang yuh in the first place than after there's more on yore conscience. But that won't happen to yuh, hombre. Go, tell the truth. If yuh killed a sneakin' tinhorn, folks'll understand better'n yuh think. Face it, and,"—he added that slowly—"tell 'em Brant Rowlings advised yuh that way. It mebbe'll help yuh a little and surprise folks some."

Serious, silent men watched the young puncher mount. He swung his horse into the shadows of the fast-coming night and they swallowed him up. The outlaws turned toward Rowlings, standing tense and questioning.

He moved closer to the fire, began stirring the red coals thoughtfully with a stick. The men came closer, too, hovering about the fire, its red glow reflecting on their set, thoughtful features. They waited for their leader to speak.

"The rest of yuh can do what you like," he said finally. "Yuh all been loyal to me. We've at least been honest with each other. All except Joe, and he's dead. Too bad—but it had to be."

He paused, looked up at them each in turn and smiled a little.

"Mebbe," he said, "some of yuh got enough confidence in me to believe it when I tell yuh the owlhoot's no good. The law'll get yuh all in the end. Yuh're all young enough to make new starts in some new country. Some of yuh can even go home and start over. Yuh'll be better off in the end that way." He paused again and shrugged wearily. "Yuh can stay here if yuh like. I'm not givin' any more orders. In the mornin' I'll be leavin' alone."

NONE spoke. Some sort of tense thoughtfulness seemed to hold them tight-lipped and thoughtful. The dead man lay before them, his open eyes staring sightlessly at the black sky, a grim sort of material object lesson.

Little Ferdi nodded silently as if he had been thinking, and as if he had decided. He walked off and a moment later led his horse from the shadows. He mounted, then with the firelight playing on his face as he smiled down at Brant Rowlings.

"Thanks, Boss. I'm taking a long, long ride, clear past the end of the owlhoot, down Mexico way. You don't hear so much about them, but I've heard there's honest cowpunching jobs down there."

Rowlings grinned. Ferdi's simple words made him feel happy inside.

"Good luck, Ferdi," he said.

A few seconds later the hoof-beats of the sensible little fellow's mount faded out in the dark distance.

Jim Clarson came and shook Brant Rowlings' hand without saying a word. He mounted his horse and rode off alone in the night. Clark Tadburn and Frank Bret rode off together just before dawn.

The bright sun of the new day found only the faithful Negro still in camp with Brant Rowlings.

"What do we do now, Boss?" he asked.

"I limp pretty bad, Sam. But I can still get around. I think I'll head out Nevada way. They've struck gold there." Rowlings grinned wryly. "The law'll catch up with me sooner or later, I reckon, but meantime I'll get me a jackass and mebbe do a little prospectin' up in the hills. You better strike off on yore own, Sam. Yuh'd be held back taggin' around after me."

Sam opened his eyes wide. "Boss, you-all don't know nothin' 'bout them jackass animals. You-all cain't drive them beasts. They got to be led. That be my job, Boss." The Negro fell thoughtful and stroked his lips between his thumb and forefinger. "Besides, Boss, if that law catch up with you-all some day, how yuh goin' to have de moral strength to stand bein' hanged without old Sambo is right there beside yuh?"

Brant Rowlings looked at him. He did not smile. His throat felt tight.

"All right, Sam. Yuh can come."

They mounted and rode westward.

That's Texas!

Where Rangers fought an' bled,
To make th' country great—
An' cleared away th' wilds
To found th' Lone Star State—
That's Texas!

Where old Sam Houston built
A land o' pioneers,
Where deeds o' golden glory
Echo down the years—
That's Texas!

Where everythin' is man to man
An' room enough for all—
An' every mother's son prepared,
To answer country's call—
That's Texas!

—TEX MUMFORD.

The battle turned into a swift, confused rush

TIME TO FIGHT

By ALLAN BOSWORTH

Author of "Ride to Nowhere," "Pull Leather—or Die," etc.

Dal Crocker, From Tennessee, Who Wants to Serve Texas, Gets His Chance When Sam Houston Sends a Call for Battlers!

DAL CROCKER rode into the clearing at dusk. The March rain drizzled between fluttering gusts that sent ghostly Spanish moss swinging and showering from the live-oaks. Courage had fled eastward on the wings of panic, and a gray hopelessness lay over Texas.

He cried out twice with a lusty "Halloa!" and sat wearily for a time, listening and looking. A dog barked, and the sound had that emptiness which comes from bare walls.

The rider swung down. Even after his boots sank past his ankles in the mulatto mud of the Brazos bottom

land, he was taller than the average in a country of tall men. The chill deepened and clung to him with his wet buckskins. He started walking forward, leading the horse.

The deserters had preceded him with their news and their contagious panic. Cole's settlement had heard about Fannin's massacre at Goliad. It had heard that Santa Anna was on the Colorado with thirty thousand men, and that Sam Houston was a "coward" in full retreat toward the Sabine.

Cole's settlement was on the run, like all the other towns from Washington-on-the-Brazos to the Gulf. Like Gonzales, where the ashes of houses were scarcely cold.

Dal Crocker's gray eyes were red-rimmed from more than thirty hours without sleep, thirty hours in the saddle, in the drizzle that seeped its chill into a man's bones. He shifted his rifle around under his left armpit and walked stiffly on, looking at the houses. They glared back through dark swirling mist. Holes showed where the mud had fallen away during the rain. There was no light anywhere, and even the grayness was dimming.

His boots splashed into a rivulet. A wagon rut that was fresh in the mud. Yonder was a bed sheet caught on a hackberry bush; there a wagon sagged with one wheel broken and the splintered hub half buried in the wet ground. A pitiful array of household effects were spilled over its side. A trunk lay broken open, and a doll was caught between the tray and the lid.

He passed a cabin that gave out the pungence of woodsmoke beaten down from the stick-and-mud chimney. Subconsciously he associated the fragrance with food, and his stomach began gnawing again. He felt hot and cold at the same time.

The folks of Cole's settlement hadn't been gone long. Two or three hours, maybe. They would be over on the Brazos with the wagons Sam Houston needed so badly, and maybe some rifles.

Dal Crocker worried when he thought of Houston and the army. Houston had promised he would fight when the time came. And suppose that time came while Crocker was up here riding the settlements with the advance guard that was trying to undo the harm the deserters had done?

A SMOKEHOUSE door was ajar. He saw a hound slink away from it, and the smell of bacon came his way and made his mouth water. Sam Houston wouldn't mind if he cut a little piece for food. He tied the horse to a dripping tree and unsheathed his bowie knife.

He was in the smokehouse door, and the patter of rain was loud on the clapboard roof, when he saw the girl.

She wasn't making any noise. She ran with her bedraggled poke bonnet bent against the drizzle. She stumbled and fell, but something drove her on. Dal Crocker stared, because she was running from the direction of the Brazos, and not toward it.

She had some sort of cloak that didn't protect her much, and the long gown she wore must have been her finest, but now the mud spattered it and the wetness made it cling to her slender figure. She was a wraith in the dripping shadows as she went by without seeing either Crocker or the horse.

Then she darted into the doorway of a cabin. He could hear her shoes on the puncheon floor, the only sound in this deserted settlement.

He forgot the bacon and his hunger. His bowie knife went back into his belt, and he tried to make no noise as he approached, because that would startle her. But his boot scraped on the door sill, and his tall form was a sinister silhouette against the fading light.

She straightened from the blurred outline of a big trunk. There wasn't any scream. He could hear her quick breathing. His eyes grew more accustomed to the darkness, and he saw the blurred oval of her white face and the fluttering of a slender hand at her throat, where the dark cloak was buttoned.

"Who—who are you, and what do you want?"

He thought she asked the question calmly enough, considering that she must have had a right smart of a scare. But as he stepped in out of the drizzle he was wondering at the strangeness of her speech. Back home in Tennessee, folks didn't talk like that, kind of harsh like, and sounding all their "R's." Folks in Texas didn't, either, because most of them had come from the South.

He thought of Captain George Erath, back there with Sam Houston, and how Erath's guttural German accent sounded when he gave a command. Then he jerked himself back to the present.

"Why, I'm from General Houston's army, ma'am," he said proudly. "I just—"

The gladness leaped from her lips. "Oh, is the army here? Are you going to fight?"

"Well"—Dal Crocker shifted his tired weight awkwardly—"we'll fight, all right enough. When the general figgers it's the proper time. But the army's back yonder quite a spell. I'm one of the advance scouts, ma'am."

"You mean you're retreating faster than the rest of those cowards!" There was a chill sarcasm in her words. She spoke fast and angrily. "Oh, if I were only a man! If we only had some good New England blood in Texas. Men like we had at Concord and Lexington. They didn't retreat!"

So that was it. She came from the North. Crocker felt the hot flush in his cheeks, and there was that chill along his spine.

"Seems to me Andy Jackson done mighty well at fighting," he said drily, "and he's from Tennessee. Sure, I'd like to fight right now, myself. But I ain't got the say. Everything's all talk and no cider, but I reckon the time will come . . . What are you doing here, anyhow?"

She hesitated. "I—I came back for something."

He could see that. "But where's your folks? Where's everybody from Cole's?"

"They're crossing the Brazos by now, I guess. They're in a hurry."

SHE groped her way along the wall, found the fireplace, and took something from the mantel. Then she stirred the ashes, found a live coal, and a flame cupped in her hand. She straightened with a candle.

Her mouth was as soft as the flame, and more vivid. She had dark eyes, too large for the wistful oval of her face, and her hair was down and wet. It was wavy and black with a lustrous sheen that didn't all come from the dampness.

When she set the candle on a table, Crocker saw the remnants of a meal still on it. He was thinking that she was mighty young to be running around loose like this, at a time when there were looters and prowlers.

"You hadn't ought to come back like this," he told her. "What was it you forgot?"

She found it, just then. Lifting a small carpet bag to the table, she stooped over the trunk and brought out a dress of some sort. It was an ivory color, silk or sateen, by the way it glistened, and it had a lot of lacy fol-de-rols to make it a whole lot finer than any gown Dal Crocker had ever seen.

"It was this," she said softly, and there was a reverence in her words. "My wedding dress!"

Crocker swallowed and said "Oh," because there was nothing else to say.

He was feeling awkward and uncouth in his wet buckskins, and suddenly remembered that he had been wearing his soaked coonskin cap all this time in the presence of a lady. She was about the prettiest lady he had seen in Texas, too. He reckoned she could hold her own back in Tennessee, for that matter. He fumbled his cap and his rifle got in the way.

"I reckon you'll be ready to go, now, ma'am," he said. "I'll take you to your folks. I've got a horse out yonder." She didn't answer at once; she was looking at the dress, and he could sort of picture her in it, with the bosom cut low, and maybe a fan held across it.

"My name's Dal Crocker," he said. "From Tennessee."

The girl smiled. "I'm Mary Bristol, from Vermont. You're very kind, Mr. Crocker."

He wasn't accustomed to being called "mister," and he imagined his reddish hair was all rumpled up and wild. Feeling hot and cold and confused all at once, he tried to laugh.

"I reckon we're all Texans just now. Come this way, ma'am."

Somehow her hand touched his cheek as he helped her to mount. It was like a wet, warm flower—like when your horse carries you under a magnolia tree after a summer shower. He handed up the little carpetbag, and toed the stirrup.

In the doorway of the last cabin a cat was mewing forlornly. The horse got off the road and trampled through some fine young corn that would be bearing roasting ears in June. Crocker wondered vaguely if there would be anybody in Cole's settlement when the corn ripened. And when the horse went by a little shack set back from the cabin, chickens squalled.

People were crazy, leaving their homes like this. Sam Houston had said that fifteen hundred men could whip any force Santa Anna brought to the Colorado. Dal Crocker swung his rifle across his back with the sling under one armpit, and thought of how many men were fleeing instead of rallying to help Houston beat back the advances of Santa Anna.

He had to say something finally, because he was too much aware of the nearness of Mary Bristol, sitting on the saddle just in front of him. So he said:

"You didn't walk all the way back from the Brazos, did you? It must be nearly ten miles."

"No. We were halfway there when I remembered the dress. I slipped out of the back end of the wagon."

THAT was certainly a foolish thing to do, Dal Crocker thought, but he held his tongue.

They passed something that bulked at the side of the road. Somebody had lightened a wagon's load by stacking chairs and other furniture in the rain.

"Where are the rest of the—the advance scouts?" the girl asked.

Crocker didn't know, and it might be days before he saw them again. Houston had fewer than eight hundred men, and he couldn't spare more than a handful to send ahead. Others were deserting to help their families, almost as fast as recruits came in.

"Scattered between Washington and Harrisburg," he told Mary Bristol. "But I reckon we can go back to the army pretty soon. When folks are over the Brazos, they ought to be safe enough."

"Everybody says we won't be safe till we cross the Sabine," she retorted. "You can't blame the people. The government convention didn't think it was safe to stay in Washington-on-the-Brazos. They went to Harrisburg."

"They've got papers to protect," Crocker defended. "And they have to raise money for General Houston, so he can get guns and horses."

"He's afraid! He won't fight."

"That's not so, ma'am!" Dal Crocker was feeling sick and weary. He knew he was saying this as much to assure himself as he was for the sake of argument. "He'll fight. That's what he came to Texas for. That's what I came for."

"It'll be too late before he does!" Mary Bristol said bitterly. "We've lost everything, already."

There wasn't any answer to this. They rode with only the slogging sound of the horse's hoofs and the incessant dripping of the trees. Now they could have followed the road without any ruts to guide them, because not a hundred yards passed without some abandoned piece of furniture or other possession to mark the course of the "Runaway Scrape."

Once a wagon loomed in the darkness and two men were wrestling with a wheel in a chug-hole. Crocker answered their challenge and offered to help, but when he identified himself as one of Houston's soldiers, they cursed him and ordered him away.

"They'll see!" he told the girl.

"We'll fight, all right."

"I believe *you* would, anyway," she said, and impulsively laid her hand on his arm as he held the bridle reins. "And I hope you get back in time."

It was midnight when they came to the Brazos. He saw a fire burning high on the bank where the ferry landing was, but the ferry was on the other side and three wagons were waiting. The first one had a lantern under its bowed tarp, and a slatternly woman peered out curiously at them.

"Oh, Mrs. Stevens!" the girl exclaimed. "Have you seen—"

"Your folks have done gone over, Mary. And they're fitten to be tied, too, with you missin'. What happened to ye, for land's sakes?"

Her voice was high and querulous, and there was a dirty-faced youngster crowding into the vent of the wagon sheet, chewing on a piece of bacon rind. Dal Crocker saw that the woman was staring at him, and he felt ill at ease.

"I forgot something I wanted," Mary Bristol explained. "When will the ferry be back?"

"Reckon they're havin' some trouble, and there ain't no tellin'. Maybe an hour. They're mighty slow."

"Boat for hire!" a man shouted from down the steep bank. "Boat for hire, mister!"

"I could get off here and go with the Stevenses," the girl said.

BUT Crocker took another look at the slatternly woman and shook his head. It didn't appear that Mary would be any too welcome. Besides, with the Bristol wagon already across, and perhaps going on, they couldn't wait an hour for the ferry.

For the first time he wondered about Mary Bristol's husband, and an unreasonable anger and jealousy burned within him. It wasn't right for an able-bodied man to be hurrying east like this, when Texas needed him so badly. It wasn't even sensible. If a man was married to a girl as pretty as this one, he had all the more to fight for.

He turned the horse with a vicious pull of the rein, and rode down the bank toward the man with the boat. They could see lanterns bobbing mistily on the farther shore. Shouts came faintly from across the river, and Crocker realized the water was high.

"How much?" he asked, and the squat man who stood by a little fire of his own removed a stubby pipe from his mouth and spat.

"You put up five dollars. Bring the boat back, and you get two dollars back after you take your wife over. If you leave the boat on the other side, and my son has to bring it back, he gets the two dollars."

It all sounded complicated, and Dal Crocker felt weak, and that hot and cold sensation was surging through him again. He didn't have five dollars in the world. There was three-fifty in his pocket.

"How about taking my horse for security? I'll bring the boat back. I'm one of Houston's men."

"That ain't no recommendation," growled the boat owner, and Crocker wanted to leap and smash the pipe down his throat. "But I reckon the horse is worth five dollars. Go ahead. Let your wife get in first."

"She's not—" Dal Crocker began, then stopped.

It didn't matter what this man thought. He was worse even than the submissionists. He was making money off human misery.

Crocker helped the girl down. She was still clinging to the carpetbag, and he thought the wedding dress must be pretty well soaked by now. Her petticoats whispered as her slenderness slid past him, and then he steadied the boat for her and stepped in to take the oars. They were clumsy, and so was he. The Tennessee mountains taught men how to use a rifle, but not a pair of oars.

The current caught them as the squat man gave a shove.

"You haven't been around many lakes," the girl said, with a trace of amusement.

Dal Crocker saved his breath and shook his head. The firelight was misting. They went downstream pretty fast, and the dim lantern glow on yellowed wagon sheets was blotted

out by the wet darkness. He looked over his shoulder and saw that the bobbing lights on the eastern bank were far upstream.

"I guess you must think I'm very ungrateful, Mr. Crocker," Mary said softly. "I haven't told you how much I'm indebted to you. I didn't stop to think when I went back. I was only thinking of my wedding dress, and how I couldn't bear to leave it in that trunk."

"Nobody's thinking, this side of Sam Houston!" he growled, and put all the strength of his aching shoulders into the oars.

They were about midway in the dark stream when it happened. The log struck end-on, and the splintering shock came without warning. The boat lurched and heeled. Mary Bristol's cry was cut off by the black water.

Crocker let go the flailing oars and kicked himself free. Mary's bonnet went under. Her free hand was like a small white bird on the water, and then it vanished, too.

CROCKER took two strokes and dived. That rifle was on its way to the bottom and he was thinking how badly Sam Houston needed rifles. His groping hand touched Mary Bristol's sleeve, clutched it.

The log struck him hard and full across the side of his head. Bright, whirling lights shot through the water. With a dim consciousness of things, he managed to go deeper and pull the girl with him, and by now the log should be in the clear. He slipped his arm around her waist and fought for the surface.

She was struggling a little, not against him, but against those hampering petticoats. And when his head cleared water and the air was like a shock to the gash in his temple, he heard her strangling cough and felt her go limp in his grasp.

Crocker trod water and saw something dark and substantial sweeping by. He grabbed at it, caught the tail end of the log. The rough bark skinned his fingers, but he held on. It took all of his strength to lift the girl across the timber. He could only hold on and drift, and see to it that her face was out of the water.

All sense of time and distance was gone. He only knew that there was a jar as the log struck the bank, and when he let his long legs down, his boots touched bottom. He lifted the girl and staggered toward shore. There was a path through tangled vines, and a dog barking.

He stumbled across the threshold of a cabin and called out, but nobody answered. The girl moaned and sat up. Dal Crocker didn't remember any more. . . .

Consciousness returned in flashes. In between were nightmares — the muddy swirl of the Brazos sweeping over him and a girl with dark eyes; the terrible, torturing thirst burning his very veins; the brown river suddenly changing to a tide of brown-skinned men; Sam Houston fleeing on a white horse, and the brown tide rolling on.

Then a strangling, and he knew he had fallen. But he opened his eyes to see the smoky rafters of a cabin and to feel a soft hand placing a wet cloth on his throbbing forehead.

"I've got to go!" he told Mary Bristol. "Your folks — your husband — you've got to join them, and I have to get back to the army!"

"There—don't worry about it just now. Just rest, and try to sleep a little!"

Yes, he did need sleep. He was cold and hot again. The thirst came back. He cried for water and never knew when it was trickling between his lips. There was an aching in all his raw-boned body. More hideous dreams.

Then he lay quietly and watched the sun come through the door and swing toward the bed. It was morning, and he certainly would have to go, now. That man up there by the crossing might sell his horse. It was strange that he was so weak. He would close his eyes and rest just a few more minutes—

A shadow fell across the doorway. He could see the brilliance shut out, even with his eyes closed. He opened

[*Turn to page 104*]

A THOUSAND YEARS OLD AND STILL LIVING!

A strange method of mind and body control that often leads to immense powers never before experienced is announced by Edwin J. Dingle, well-known explorer and geographer. It is said to bring about almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind. Many report improvement in health. Others acquire superb bodily strength, secure better positions, turn failure into success. Often with surprising speed, talents, ability and a more magnetic personality are developed.

The method was found in remote and mysterious Tibet, formerly a forbidden country rarely visited by outsiders and often called the land of miracles in the astounding books written about it. Here, behind the highest mountains in the world, Mr. Dingle learned the extraordinary system he is now disclosing to the Western World.

He maintains that all of us are giants in strength and mind power, capable of surprising feats, from the delay of old age to the prolonging of youth and the achievement of dazzling business and professional success. From childhood, however, we are hypnotized, our powers put to sleep by the suggestions of associates, by what we read and by various experiences.

To realize their really marvelous powers, men and women must escape from this hypnotism. The method found by Mr. Dingle in Tibet is said to be remarkably instrumental in freeing the mind of the hypnotizing ideas that paralyze the giant powers within us.

Our accepted ideas of old age and death, he claims, would prove utterly wrong if we could escape from their hypnotizing influence. He points to the exotic Joshua Trees of the California Desert, many of which are over a thousand years old and still living. Some are thought to be two and three thousand years old. Life and youth, he says, can persist several times longer than people think. In Tibet this is believed and certain methods, based on this belief, are employed. Incredible ages are often ascribed to sages there. "The methods are too new in the Western World," he says, "for us to have authoritative data. But they may be instrumental, meantime, in prolonging our youth and increasing our mental, physical and spiritual powers."

"The time has come," he declares, "for every enlightened man and woman to achieve the greater health, success and happiness possible through this ancient but remarkable method of mastery." His amazing 9,000 word treatise is now being offered by The Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. 97-L, Los Angeles, Calif. They offer to send it free to any readers of this paper who quickly send their names and addresses. Readers are urged to write promptly for the free treatise.

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them just a trifle. It was Mary Bristol, carrying a pail of water. She set the bucket down by the fireplace and then came softly to his bed.

He thought it must be another dream, but he could feel the softness of her lips on his cheek, and the warmth of her breath stirred his hair. On her knees by the bed, she said very earnestly in a whisper:

"Dear God, don't let him die! Texas needs him. And—and I love him so!"

SHE went to the fireplace as if startled by her own confession. He could hear her breaking small branches for kindling. He lay quietly for a long time and dared not even breathe. He lifted his hand to touch his cheek where her lips had been, and there was a stubble of whiskers to meet his fingertips. Which was strange, because he had shaved only two days before, and at twenty his beard didn't grow so fast.

He sat up in a panic.

"How long have I been here?" he demanded.

The sudden motion made his head throb with shooting pains. Mary turned with a joyous cry.

"Dal! You're better! You're not delirious any more! I'm so glad!"

It was the first time he had seen her smile. The first time he had seen her in daylight, with the sun at her back. Her dark eyes were really violet, with little lights deep within them. Lights that danced. She was vibrantly beautiful and alive, and it hadn't been a dream.

But he looked past her and saw the little carpetbag setting on the edge of a table covered with pots and pans.

Closing his eyes, he asked dully, "How long have I — have we been here?"

"Five days—no, six. Today would be the fourth of April. You've had a terrible fever, but I found some quinine here, and—"

"Six days! Good Lord, they'll have me down as a deserter. Where's the army—and Santa Anna? Have they fought yet?"

"Hush and rest!"

She pulled the patchwork quilt up around his shoulders. It smelled of fever. He saw his buckskins hanging stiffly from an end post of the bed, and he thought of what she must have done during his illness, and felt hot again. She smoothed back his hair with a cool hand.

"I don't know any of those things," she said softly. "I haven't even seen anybody, except one man who rode by on a horse—yesterday. He didn't stop. I don't even know where we are, except that we are still on the west bank. The boat was wrecked, you know."

With his eyes shut, he could talk in a reasonably calm manner.

"It's sure a fine fix for you to be in, ma'am. You ought to have gone on back up to Groce's Ferry, because your husband will be mighty worried."

Her laughter was silver in the room. He looked up, surprised, and she stopped. But her eyes were shining.

"I haven't got a husband, Dal Crocker!" Her lashes fell modestly on her cheek.

"But—but you said—that wedding dress—"

"It was my mother's wedding dress, and her mother's before her, Dal. I always planned for it to be mine. That's why I went back. But I'm only seventeen, and Father wouldn't hear of me thinking of being wed. He's set on my schooling. I've been going to Miss Trask's school in Cole's."

Crocker felt of his cheek and smiled to himself. All at once he felt strong again. He felt like he could go out and whip General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna and all his men, single-handed.

Her hand caressed his hair again, and he caught it and pulled Mary close. It was enough of happiness, for the moment, to hold her and remember that whisper: "I love him so!"

Then there were horses outside, and men's voices, and all at once a confusion in the doorway.

"Father!" Mary cried and sprang back from the bed with her cheeks going scarlet and then white.

DAL CROCKER sat up and looked at the lean, elderly man who stood on the threshold with his mouth open, and the bleakness of New England in his slate-colored eyes. His brows were still black and heavy, his nose was long and straight, and there was righteousness written in every stern line of his face.

His mouth closed, then opened, and he said sharply:

"Father, eh? I'll never be father to you again! You sneaked out of the wagon and went back to this man, didn't you? You left your poor mother worrying nigh onto the point of death. I always said—"

"Father! You don't know what you're saying! I didn't—"

"Hold your tongue!"

Bristol took a menacing step toward the bed. Dal Crocker shook his head, started to throw back the cover, and remembered those buckskins at the foot.

"You're misjudging your daughter, sir," he began, but Bristol made a violent gesture.

"Who are you?" he shouted.

"Dal Crocker, sir. One of Houston's scouts. Your daughter—"

"One of Houston's riffraff! Scum—despoilers! If they hadn't taken my gun, I'd shoot you like I'd shoot a skunk!"

Mary was sobbing wildly. She threw herself into her father's arms. He thrust her away and Dal's fever-thinned blood boiled.

Bristol ground the name over his teeth: "Dal Crocker!" and raised his voice to a stridence. "Here's one of your deserters! Take him—and I'll see Sam Houston myself." He glowered at his daughter. "Come along, you—"

"Stop that!" Dal shouted, but Bristol jerked the sobbing girl out the door.

A weakness overcame him. He sank back and heard a horse threshing hoofs in protest at rough handling. Then the sound slogged away, and one last cry came from Mary. It was "Dal!"

Three men came in. The heavy one spat tobacco juice in the fireplace.

"All right, bud," he said. "Get your duds on."

[*Turn page*]

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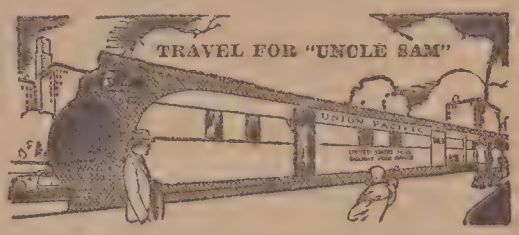

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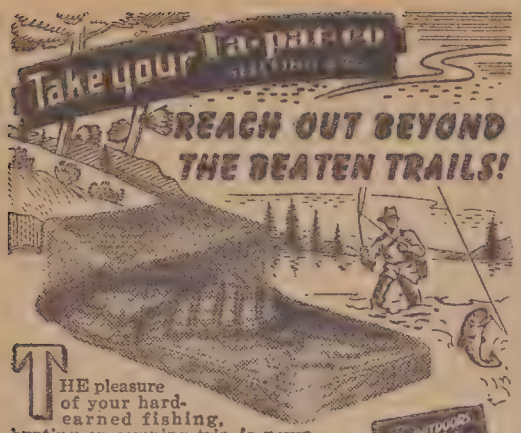

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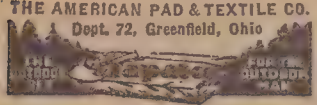

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Crocker nodded, climbed out shakily, and thought his head would split when he put on his boots.

"Where's the army?" he asked. "Have we fought?"

The heavy man shifted his tobacco. "No, *we* ain't fought!" he said. "We've been too busy 'tendin' to other things!"

The others laughed roughly, and Dal felt too ill to argue.

He saw the carpetbag was still on the table, and took it along. The bright sunshine of April seared his eyeballs and it took all his strength to pull himself up behind a saddle. They rode north and a little way west of the Brazos, where the timber ended.

THERE were six other prisoners in the camp by Groce's ferry. The word went around that Houston had ordered death for looters. A red-bearded giant laughed and said it wasn't the first time he'd been arrested for taking whatever he wanted, and he hoped it wouldn't be the last. Revulsion gripped the boy from Tennessee.

There was misery in the place even for a well man. It rained. There were no tents. They said Sam Houston spent the night sitting on his saddle, with a blanket over his shoulders and his feet on a log. They said the spies had learned that Santa Anna's men had crossed the Colorado and were at San Felipe.

And reports of spreading terror seeped into camp. Other men left to help their families, and death was ordered for deserters, too.

Houston himself came to the rope stockade where the prisoners squatted in the mud. Dal rose and stood at attention. The big general looked at the prisoners with more pity than scorn.

Dal Crocker had never seen a man so utterly weary, a man whose eyes alone seemed alive. He was unshaven, and his clothing was soiled and muddy. He shook his head and said:

"Texas needed men, not cowards—deserters."

"Sir!" The words leaped to young Crocker's lips. "I'm not guilty of anything, sir, and I—I want to fight!"

Houston was turning away, but he stopped now.

"What's your name, lad?" When Dal Crocker told him, he shook his massive head again. "I heard about you being found with the Bristol girl. I'm sorry, but you'll have to stand court-martial with the rest."

There was no time just now for courts-martial. On the twelfth, they started across the Brazos with the aid of the small steamer Yellowstone and a yawl. It took all day and all night. There was an order from Houston to be in readiness. Santa Anna, the reports said, was at Harrisburg.

On the 15th, the Texans marched toward that town through a wet prairie. Dal Crocker saw Sam Houston put his shoulder to the wheel of a bogged supply wagon. The unrest grew. Everybody but Houston wanted to fight. Crocker lay awake at night and wondered if he had been mistaken in his hero. Wondered if he would ever see Mary again, if her father had forced her to accompany him to camp and lie about charges against him. In Bristol, he saw the workings of the sanctimonious New England conscience, workings he could not understand. A father turned against his own daughter.

Three blankets away, a prisoner rolled over and moaned:

"They'll shoot me! They'll shoot me!" and as his voice rose to a crescendo of fear, the red-bearded giant cursed.

"Shut up!" he growled. "What odds does it make, anyhow? Didn't the yeller-bellies massacre ever'body at the Alamo, and Goliad? I reckon they're too many for us!"

"That's a lie!" Crocker heard himself saying angrily. "We can lick 'em all, if we'd only fight!"

"Save your pepper, youngster!" the red-bearded one said, good-naturedly. "Go to sleep."

But Dal Crocker couldn't. His head was pillowed on the carpetbag. He let his cheek touch the roughness of it, and a faint smile crossed his lips. The stars were breaking out of a mist.

Next morning he wrote a penciled note and put it inside the bag. It said, simply:

I love you. Good-by. Dal

One of the guards had promised to

[*Turn page*]

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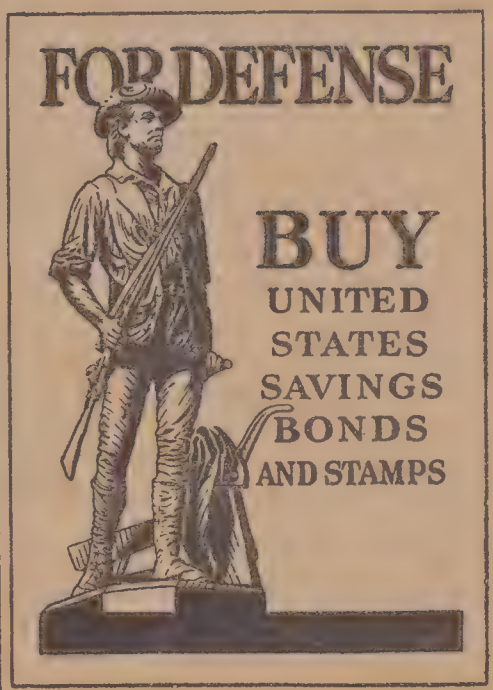
do everything he could toward seeing that Mary got the bag, if Cole's was ever resettled.

The court-martial was held over a drumhead on the following day, and Houston was too busy to preside. A major took charge, wasted most of the time on a flight of oratory that dealt with the military crimes of looting and desertion from Caesar's day onward. He was struggling through the American revolution when Houston sent word for the troops to march.

In the next five minutes, the court condemned seven men to die by the firing squad. But just now there was no time to execute the seven, and it is doubtful that Sam Houston would have allowed so many bullets to be expended on anyone but the enemy.

The Texans marched until one o'clock in the morning, slept on the ground, and were aroused by the tap of a drum. Throughout that day there were skirmishes and councils of war, and once, far to the southwest, Dal Crocker heard the rattle of musketry.

He didn't care, now. He was dog-tired and numbed by the cold wind that cut through his wet buckskins. Pacing the mud like a panther ready to drop from sheer exhaustion, he



wondered dully why they were waiting. But the darkness came, and the seven condemned men were still alive, and even the red-bearded ruffian was nervous and irritable.

DAWN was clear, and there was a sense of things moving, a feeling of premonition that stirred Dal Crocker. From the rope stockade, he watched messengers riding back and forth, saw Houston and his colonels gather under a post-oak and confer earnestly. Everybody in the army knew "Deaf" Smith, and there he was with an axe, heading down the bayou in the company of another man.

"Yonder"—the sentry pointed to a low line that had risen across the prairie—"is the Mexes' breastworks. They say mebbe we'll fight today!"

"I wish I had a gun," Dal Crocker breathed. His knuckles were white against the ropes.

But the hours dragged. Noon. One o'clock, and a tenseness over the camp even the prisoners could feel. Two. Then a movement of troops. The Texans were parading.

Sam Houston came to the stockade. Crocker noticed that he looked refreshed and younger. The fire was bright in his eyes.

"Men," he said in a low voice, "I have not had an opportunity to review the sentences passed upon you by the court. I may never have that time. For we are about to attack."

"God bless you, sir!" Dal Crocker breathed aloud.

"Texas needs fighting men now more than it needs vengeance for the crimes you are convicted of having committed. As commander in chief, I revoke your sentences—on one condition! That you enter the thickest of the fray and remain there until the battle has done. Do you solemnly promise to do that?"

A murmur of assent. Crocker looked down the line of the convicted seven, and saw chins go up. A tingling climbed his spine. Houston was turning to an orderly.

"Supply them with rifles and ammunition," he said. "Give them back their bowie knives. Report to your companies, men, and do your best!"

This was all like another dream. It

[*Turn page*]

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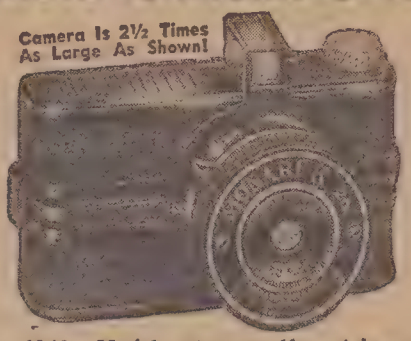

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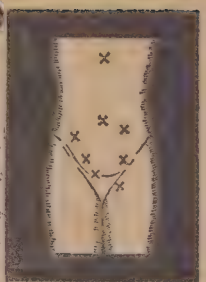

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happened too smoothly, too swiftly, to be real. A few minutes more and they were marching. The handful of Texas cavalry moved to the right, where Santa Anna's horses were stationed. The infantry advanced in column toward a cluster of timber that concealed their movements, and then deployed into line.

Dal Crocker had no horse, now. He was a foot soldier. The sky was a deep burning blue, and the air was soft. There was green grass underfoot, and a stealthy silence lay over all. Nobody cheered; nobody spoke above an ordinary tone.

Deaf Smith rode up to where Sam Houston's horse moved at the front of his men. A little later the general announced to the line that Vince's bridge had been destroyed, and the enemy's avenue of escape across the bayou was cut.

Somebody began singing then, softly, and the whole line took the refrain. A lone fife had started it, and continued the shrill defiance of its accompaniment even after flame and thunder ripped from the earthernworks at the left.

No one man could see it all. The battle for Dal Crocker turned into a swift, confused rush in which he was swept along by the contagion of courage and a burning hatred.

Captain Erath's "Sharge, p o y s, sharge!" sent the men on the double, and nobody had fired a gun on the Texas side so far.

Something went by Crocker's ear like a bumblebee. There was a dull, *spatting* sound. The man at his left coughed and fell, and his rifle got in the way of Crocker's long legs. He had a swift glimpse of bewilderment etched on a white face, and he thought, "There's no pain—just a shock."

HE saw the tongue of crimson streak from the nearest enemy cannon, but there was a shout growing in the running line, and it swelled to a volume louder than the cannon's roar. It came from the stout heart of Texas:

"Remember the Alamo!"

Dal Crocker got to his feet again and was stung by the thought that other men were ahead of him. Sam Houston was a fine figure on his horse,

cutting the smoke swirl with his sword and firing a pistol at the enemy.

Crocker plunged on. He remembered his rifle when guns began to crack around him, and he came to a dead halt and fired once.

Mexicans were wilting from the cannon, fired from the embankment. Mexicans were scattering, running. Hired Yaqui Indians fled with them.

Dal Crocker flung down his gun. There was no time to reload it. He jerked the bowie knife from its sheath and dashed between two of the enemy cannon.

The first man he struck twisted and fell, and the knife was wrenched out of his side. That gun was silent, but the next one appeared fully manned. A big shape lunged past Crocker. It was Red Beard, and as the giant's hands closed on a Mexican and yanked him over backward to meet a crimsoned blade. Crocker gloried that here was no looter and deserter.

Then a Mexican was upon him, and the struggle was sharp. He ducked under a clubbed gun, brought the knife upward in a vicious sweep, and felt it snag the cotton uniform.

"Madre de Dios!" the Mexican cried and fell, and Crocker was walking over somebody sprawled on the ground. It was Red Beard.

He felt a little sick, then, but the shouts of "Remember the Alamo! Remember Goliad!" had scarcely lessened, and Red Beard had been a Texan, whatever his sins.

Dal Crocker went on to the next gun with a fierce joy flaming in his heart and a dripping knife parrying and thrusting.

The battle ended for him in a way

[*Turn page*]

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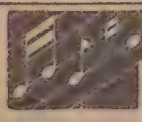

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that he never knew. There was a blinding crash against his head, he lunged wildly with the knife, and then felt warm darkness submerging over everything. . . .

Things were quiet when he opened his eyes to the twilight. A lantern lighted a tent not far away. Sam Houston sat there with a bandaged leg thrust out before him. There was a big stack of guns—more guns than the Texans had ever owned—and, over yonder, a closely guarded huddle of prisoners.

A man was groaning in quick, panting agony somewhere near Crocker. The young Tennessean sat up, and then pulled himself to his feet.

The attendants were busy looking after half a dozen of the more seriously wounded soldiers. Dal Crocker moved stealthily out of the hospital tent he knew must have been captured from Santa Anna, and walked into the night.

Things had been turned around in the confusion. He found the prisoners' stockade with some difficulty. There were horses in it, now. Alarm seized him, but he found the carpetbag safe in one corner of the pen—a little trampled, a little more muddy. Holding it closely to his chest, he started for the tent where Sam Houston lay.

There was something he had to know before he could face Mary Bristol, when he had found her—whether he was free, and had earned the right to call himself an honorable man, fit to be a citizen of a young and great nation.

HE pressed close toward the backs of the men who stood there before he realized he was crowding the members of the general's staff. Then he heard Sam Houston speaking.

"In the light of this report from Captain Erath, I see no reason why we should not surrender the prisoner, Dal Crocker, into your custody."

A pause. Dal Crocker held his breath and deliberated whether he

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should attempt to escape. The battle was over. It might not be desertion to leave now.

"Orderly!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Ascertain if Private Crocker's wound will permit him to come to my tent."

Private Crocker squared his shoulders. He didn't look very military, in buckskins that were mud-splattered and blood-stained. He had no hat, and he needed a shave again. But he looked like a man as he strode forward through the lane that opened for the orderly.

"Private Crocker reporting in person, sir!" he said as he brought his hand to his bandaged head in salute.

Sam Houston's eyes twinkled. He was about to say something, but he didn't. There was a flounce of skirts, a flash from Crocker's left. An exclamation of joy that broke into a sob, and the sob was even more joyous.

"Dal! I've found you!"

She was in his arms, with all the colonels of the Texas army looking on, with Sam Houston chuckling delightedly deep down in his chest. It took more courage to kiss her than it had taken to charge the Mexican cannon, but Dal Crocker did it.

"I—I ran away!" said Mary. "Father watched me, kept me prisoner. Until today. But now—"

Until today, Dal Crocker and Texas had been prisoners. He kissed Mary again and then led her out under the first stars. Her wedding dress was safe under his arm. There would be use for it.

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